



A Healthier You: Focus on Health, Not Weight

This handout has information to help you answer the following questions:

- What does “healthy” mean?
- Is weight important for health?
- What is a weight-inclusive approach to health?
- How can I shift the focus from weight to health?
- Where can I find more information?

What does “healthy” mean?

Health may be important to you. What does it mean to be healthy? You might think it is actions like moving your body and eating well. These actions support **physical health**, which is being able to do what you need and want to do each day with some amount of ease. Physical health is just one type of health. Some other types of health are:

- **Emotional or mental health**, which is knowing and responding to your thoughts and feelings in healthy ways.
- **Environmental health**, which is living in ways that respect both nature and built spaces where you live, work, learn, and play.

- **Financial health**, which is taking care of your money. Money is an important tool for living well.
- **Intellectual health**, which is being open to new ideas and to learning during your life.
- **Social health**, which is feeling connected to other people, your community, and your culture.
- **Spiritual health**, which is finding purpose and meaning in your life.
- **Vocational health**, which is choosing paid or unpaid work that helps you learn and feel good about yourself.

One action can affect more than one type of health. For example, being part of your cultural traditions, like gathering food, can improve all eight types of health.

A focus on only one type of health can harm other types of health. For example, changing how you eat can make it hard to join in family meals and celebrations, an important part of social health. Think about how you can balance all eight types of health.

Is weight important for health?

Weight is **not** a reliable measure of health. Here is some information to explain why it is not.

How we measure weight is a problem.

The body mass index (BMI) is one way that weight is used to describe health. BMI uses your weight and height to estimate body fat. It describes bodies using words like “normal weight” and “overweight”. People with an “overweight” BMI are thought to have poor health behaviours (for example, not eating well) and have higher risk for disease and death. This is not always true.

Labels like “overweight” can be harmful. Some people prefer being described as a “person living in a larger body”. It is up to you to decide how you want to be described.

The BMI was created almost 300 years ago to describe the “average man” using information from white middle-class men. BMI was not meant to describe a person’s health. But health care uses it because it is easy to calculate.

Research shows that people in all BMI groups get diseases like heart disease and diabetes. In fact, people with an “overweight” BMI have the lowest risk of disease. In other words, there is no disease that only people with higher BMI get.

Things like family history, income, being discriminated against, and being able to get good health care affect your risk of disease more than your health practices.

Actions to change weight do not always work.

Even though weight is not a good measure of health, you might still try to lose weight. One way you do this is by changing what and how much food you eat. This is known as dieting. Dieting increases your risk for disordered eating. Disordered eating is eating behaviours, like skipping meals or cutting foods out. Disordered eating may harm your health. For example, disordered eating might lead to stomach problems, weak bones, anxiety, and depression.

Most weight-loss diets do not result in long-term weight loss. Instead, you lose and regain weight over and over. This is called weight cycling, and it increases the risk of disease. For example, weight cycling raises your risk of heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes, and depression.

You can improve your health without a focus on weight loss. In fact, not focusing on weight loss can improve mental health, lower stress, and improve quality of life. A weight-inclusive approach to health is one way to shift the focus from weight to health.

What is a weight-inclusive approach to health?

A weight-inclusive approach:

- Accepts that people naturally come in many weights.
- Helps people to improve their health no matter their body weight.
- Knows it can be hard for people living in larger bodies to get health care and tries to fix this.

Using a weight-inclusive approach can increase your health. For example, you might feel better about yourself, have lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels, have less disordered eating behaviours, and be more connected to your community.

