



northern health
the northern way of caring

A Healthier You: Shifting the Focus from Weight to Health

Many people focus on weight loss in order to improve their health. This is called a weight-focused approach. However, evidence is growing that dieting, and living in a world that pays too much attention to weight, can be harmful. The best way to improve your health may be to take the focus *away* from weight. This is called a weight-inclusive approach.

Health can exist at many sizes, shapes and weights, and in many ways. It includes your mental, social, intellectual and spiritual wellbeing, not only your physical health. For example, a full picture of health can include your personal relationships, your job, or your interactions with your community. This resource will explore some of the challenges with a weight-focused approach and give ideas on how to practice a weight-inclusive approach in your life.

A ***weight-inclusive approach*** to health appreciates that bodies come in all shapes, sizes and weights, and works with individuals to improve their health, regardless of their weight.

Body size is complex

Your body size is influenced by many factors outside your control. These may include genetics, income, education, social support, where you live, learn, work and play, and experiences of weight bias. Not everyone has the same opportunities to be as healthy as others. Try to make positive choices where you can.

Myths and facts about weight and health



Myth: Weight is the best measure of health. “Overweight” or “obese” mean unhealthy and “normal weight” means healthy.

Fact: The body mass index (BMI) is the system used to put body weights into categories like “overweight” or “obese”. The problem is, it can’t tell us much about individual health and it doesn’t recognize that healthy bodies come in many shapes, sizes and weights. Health can exist in these diverse bodies.

Your risk for disease depends on more than how you live and your body weight. Factors such as genetics, income, and stress, influence risk for disease. For example, heart disease and diabetes affect people of all weights. People of all sizes benefit from activities that support their health such as eating well, managing stress, building positive personal relationships, and staying active.

Photo Sources: UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity.

Myth: The best way to improve health is by losing weight.

Fact: Studies show that restrictive diet and exercise programs may poorly affect mental and physical health. Dieting has been associated with increases in:

- blood pressure
- bone loss
- muscle loss
- risk of eating disorders

Having sustainable and enjoyable health habits, without focusing on weight loss, can improve health for people of all sizes and weights. We can see health improvements even if there’s no change in weight. Weight-inclusive approaches may improve mental health, blood pressure, blood cholesterol levels, self-acceptance and self-compassion.



Photo Sources: UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity.



Myth: “If I’m not actively trying to control my weight, I’ll gain a lot of weight and worsen my health.”

Fact: People can improve their health and manage chronic disease without a focus on weight loss. In fact, people who do not focus on weight loss tend to have better mental health, lower stress, and better quality of life while managing their conditions.

Consider making changes that fit with your life. You can improve your health without changes in weight. Try:

- including regular, enjoyable physical activity
- planning to feed yourself with regular meals and snacks
- creating a bedtime routine to help you sleep

Focus on taking care of yourself and adopting positive changes that make you feel good.

Myth: It is easy to lose weight and keep it off.

Fact: More than 95% of weight loss attempts do not lead to long-term weight loss or health improvements. For most people, any weight lost from dieting returns within two years. Because people often regain more weight than they lost, dieting is a better predictor of *weight gain* than weight loss.



Photo Sources: UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity.

How can you focus on health, not weight?

There are many ways to support your overall health. Your health care team, including a dietitian, can help you find ways to focus on health that work best for you. As you start to focus on wellbeing instead of weight, consider the following tips and stories:

Food

- Aim to eat a variety of foods that provide both nutrition and enjoyment; all foods fit.
- The foods we eat reflect our likes and dislikes, our culture, what we are hungry for, what is available in our cupboards and our community, how much money we have for groceries, as well as many other factors.
- If you have a chronic disease, find ways to be flexible and include a variety of foods that you enjoy and that help you manage your health.

I choose salad with my meal because it's crunchy and flavorful, because it helps control my blood sugars and because it will satisfy me – not because I'm 'being good'.

Activity

- Be active - any movement is good! All types of activities are valuable.
- Find activities that feel natural rather than forced, are enjoyable and meaningful to you, and that leave you feeling energized and happy.
- Use physical activity to appreciate and connect with your body, your environment, and those around you.

"I go two-stepping at the community centre with my wife two nights a week. We've made some good friends there; it's a whole lot of fun, and I sure do work up a sweat!"

Body image

- Know that all bodies, in all sizes and weights, are valuable and that personal good comes from within.
- Love and accept your body just the way it is and take good care of it.

"This morning, I just loved the way I looked wearing my favorite color! My kids and I had a dance party in the bathroom mirror because we all looked and felt great!"

Hunger and appetite

- Aim to eat regular meals and planned snacks. This will help you trust that you will be fed when you are hungry.
- Give yourself permission to eat in response to physical, emotional, social, or environmental types of hunger.
- Recognize that hunger fluctuates; sometimes you eat beyond fullness, and sometimes you eat less.

"I used to 'diet' all day and then snack without control all night. When I stopped ignoring my hunger, it felt like food lost its power over me. I learned to work with my body to eat the foods I want and enjoy."

To speak with a Registered Dietitian at HealthLinkBC, call 811 (or 604-215-8110).