



Aids to weight loss

Officially, being 'overweight' means weighing more than 10 per cent over the 'norm' for your height, while 'obesity' refers to being more than 20 per cent over 'normal', as well as having a body-fat percentage greater than 30 per cent for women and 25 per cent for men. So, body weight alone isn't an index of obesity.

Happily, rather than going on a crash diet, there are a number of safe and effective ways to lose weight, including maintaining a positive mental attitude.

There is evidence from a controlled study that a high-fibre weight-reduction plan can significantly increase bone loss, especially in the lumbar (lower-back) spine in post-menopausal women. And the bone loss appears to be irreversible, even if the weight is regained. So, it may be best to avoid repeated cycles of high-fibre weight loss and gain as it may well increase the risk of spinal osteoporosis (Eur J Clin Nutr, 1994; 48: 561-6).

Nutritional supplements

Try taking chromium, a mineral known to modulate sugar metabolism and to reduce sugar cravings. Double-blind trials have found that chromium supplementation promoted loss of body fat in obese people while preserving lean muscle. After overweight patients were randomly given either chromium or a placebo for 90 days, those taking the chromium lost significantly more weight (7.79 vs 1.81 kg, respectively) and fat (7.71 vs 1.53 kg, respectively), with a greater reduction in body fat, too (6.3 vs 1.2 per cent, respectively) (Curr Ther Res, 1998; 59: 379-88).

In other double-blind trials, supplementing with 5-hydroxytryptophan (5-HT) achieved significant weight loss within six weeks in obese women—with no changes in diet: those taking 5-HT reduced their carbohydrate consumption and felt satisfied sooner than usual (Neural Transm, 1989; 76: 109-17; Am J Clin Nutr, 1992; 56: 863-7).

Diet and exercise

An effective diet is one that allows 6300 kilojoules (1500 calories) per day, and is adequate in protein, reasonably high in ordinary vegetable fibre and rich in complex carbohydrates. This works especially when coupled with daily moderate exercise (heart rate in the 50-60 per cent intensity range) for about 20 minutes (Murray MT, Pizzorno JE, Jr. *Encyclopedia of Natural Medicine*. Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing, 1990: 446).

Phytotherapy

Herbal remedies can also help in the battle of the bulge. One double-blind, randomized, controlled trial involved 70 obese, but not diabetic, subjects being given either one of three different Ayurvedic herbal formulations—*vata*, *pitta* or *kapha*—depending on their type of 'constitutional energy', or a matching placebo. After three months, it was found that, even without exercise, the patients receiving the herbal treatments experienced significant weight loss

compared with those taking the placebo (J Ethnopharmacol, 1990; 29: 1-11).

The South American herbal tea called maté (*Ilex paraguariensis*) can also help you lose weight. Indeed, its energy-increasing fat-burning effects have been confirmed in a double-blind, randomized, controlled trial (Phytomedicine, 1999; 6: 231-8).

Breakfast

Eating breakfast can help to control your weight. One study found that overweight or obese school-children have less satisfactory breakfast habits than those who are 'normal' in weight (Int J Vitam Nutr Res, 1998; 68: 125-32).

Also, in a randomized trial involving moderately obese women, those who ate breakfast were more successful at losing weight than those who did not. Analysis of the data suggested that eating breakfast helped to reduce their fat intake and minimized impulse snacking (Am J Clin Nutr, 1992; 55: 645-51).

Food sensitivity

Losing weight can be even more difficult because of cravings for certain, frequently eaten, foods to which an individual may have developed a sensitivity or may have always been sensitive to. Such foods can trigger a variety of mental and physical symptoms that can make them even harder to resist.

If this is the case, then trying to keep to any weight-loss programme that happens to include these foods will be exceedingly difficult. These 'masked' food allergen(s) need to be avoided for around two weeks, during which time, a noticeable loss in retained fluid may be seen, itself resulting in weight reduction. The most common culprits are cow's milk, cane sugar and the wheat/rye/barley grains (J Lab Clin Med, 1947; 32: 1547).

Acupuncture (see below) can help to deal with these cravings.

Acupuncture

This Eastern therapy has the reputation, deservedly so, of helping to curb addictive urges. Can it also curb the appetite for food? A randomized, controlled trial treated 60 overweight patients, who were considered gourmands, with either electroacupuncture or sham acupuncture on the ears, twice a day for four weeks. It was found that acupuncture resulted in a significantly larger number of patients who lost weight, as well as a greater mean weight loss overall, compared with the sham treatment (Aust Fam Physician, 1998; 27 [suppl 2]: S73-7).

Two other randomized sham-controlled trials of good quality, including a total of more than 200 subjects, assessed appetite/hunger, and also yielded convincingly positive results with acupuncture (Wien Klin Wochenschr, 1997; 109: 60-2).

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