

# Balancing Calories and Weight Management

Achieving and sustaining appropriate body weight across the lifespan is vital to maintaining good health and quality of life. Many behavioral, environmental, and genetic factors have been shown to affect a person's body weight. Calorie balance over time is the key to weight management. Calorie balance refers to the relationship between calories consumed from foods and beverages and calories expended in normal body functions (i.e., metabolic processes) and through physical activity. People cannot control the calories expended in metabolic processes, but they can control what they eat and drink, as well as how many calories they use in physical activity.



Calories consumed must equal calories expended for a person to maintain the same body weight. Consuming more calories than expended will result in weight gain. Conversely, consuming fewer calories than expended will result in weight loss. This can be achieved over time by eating fewer calories, being more physically active, or, best of all, a combination of the two.

Maintaining a healthy body weight and preventing excess weight gain throughout the lifespan are highly preferable to losing weight after weight gain. Once a person becomes obese, reducing body weight back to a healthy range requires significant effort over a span of time, even years. People who are most successful at losing weight, and keeping it off, do so through continued attention to calorie balance.

To address the current calorie imbalance in the United States, individuals are encouraged to become more conscious of what they eat and what they do. This means increasing awareness of what, when, why, and how much they eat, deliberately making better choices regarding what and how much they consume, and seeking ways to be more physically active. Several behaviors and practices have been shown to help people manage their food and beverage intake and calorie expenditure and ultimately manage body weight. The behaviors with the strongest evidence related to body weight include

- **Focus on the total number of calories consumed.** Maintaining a healthy eating pattern at an appropriate calorie level within the *Acceptable Macronutrient Distribution Range (AMDR)* is

advisable for weight management. Consuming an eating pattern low in calorie density may help to reduce calorie intake and improve body weight outcomes and overall health.

- **Monitor food intake.** Monitoring intake has been shown to help individuals become more aware of what and how much they eat and drink. The Nutrition Facts label found on food packaging provides calorie information for each serving of food or beverage and can assist consumers in monitoring their intake. Also, monitoring body weight and physical activity can help prevent weight gain and improve outcomes when actively losing weight or maintaining body weight following weight loss.
- **When eating out, choose smaller portions or lower-calorie options.** When possible, order a small-sized option, share a meal, or take home part of the meal. Review the calorie content of foods and beverages offered and choose lower-calorie options. Calorie information may be available on menus, in a pamphlet, on food wrappers, or online. Or, instead of eating out, cook and eat more meals at home.
- **Prepare, serve, and consume smaller portions of foods and beverages, especially those high in calories.** Individuals eat and drink more when provided larger portions. Serving and consuming smaller portions is associated with weight loss and weight maintenance over time.
- **Eat a nutrient-dense breakfast.** Not eating breakfast has been associated with excess body weight, especially among children and adolescents. Consuming breakfast also has been associated with weight loss and weight loss maintenance, as well as improved nutrient intake.
- **Limit screen time.** In children, adolescents, and adults, screen time, especially television viewing, is directly associated with increased overweight and obesity. Children and adolescents are encouraged to spend no more than 1 to 2 hours each day watching television, playing electronic games, or using the computer (other than for homework). Also, avoid eating while watching television, which can result in overeating.

Research has investigated additional principles that may promote calorie balance and weight management. However, the evidence for these behaviors is not as strong. Some evidence indicates that beverages are less filling than solid foods, such that the calories from beverages may not be offset by reduced intake of solid foods, which can lead to higher total calorie intake. In contrast, soup, particularly broth or water-based soups, may lead to decreased calorie intake and body weight over time. Further, replacing added sugars with non-caloric sweeteners may reduce calorie intake in the short-term, yet questions remain about their effectiveness as a weight management strategy. Other behaviors have been studied, such as snacking and frequency of eating, but there is currently not enough evidence to support a specific recommendation for these behaviors to help manage body weight.

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion (CNPP). (2010). Balancing calories to manage weight. In *Dietary Guidelines for Americans, Chapter 2*. Retrieved February 3, 2011, from <http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/>