

Understanding the complexity of weight and health

The relationship between your weight and health is more complex than the number you see on the scale. It is influenced by a range of factors in addition to energy in versus energy out.

Everyone's body is different

A healthy weight is different for everyone. We cannot determine if someone is healthy simply by their weight.

Some people can have a [body mass index \(BMI\)](#) within a healthy range while having poor cardiometabolic health (high blood sugar levels, high blood cholesterol, fatty liver or low cardiorespiratory fitness) and engaging in unhealthy lifestyle behaviours, such as poor nutrition, sedentary lifestyle, high alcohol intake or smoking.

Likewise, some people can have a BMI above a healthy range with good cardiometabolic health and engage in a range of healthy behaviours, including eating a well-balanced diet, exercising regularly, avoiding excess alcohol and getting adequate sleep.

Factors that can impact body weight

There are over [100 different factors](#) that can contribute to the development of obesity and many cannot be controlled by the individual.

Some of the main reasons why people can carry extra body weight are outlined below:

- Family background – the genetic influence on obesity is reported to be 40–80 per cent.
- Human biology – the human body has powerful built-in mechanisms to protect against starvation, which can make it hard to maintain weight loss.
- Mental health – certain conditions can impact on appetite, motivation and activity levels.
- Weight stigma and weight bias – exposure can have a negative impact on physiology, mental health, motivation and activity levels.
- Medical conditions or living with a disability – mobility limitations and intellectual or learning disabilities can make it more difficult to be physically active and eat a healthy diet.
- Some medicines – side effects can increase appetite or slow the metabolism.
- Eating disorders and disordered eating behaviours – restricting food intake or bingeing can impact body weight and often require professional help.
- Where people live, go to school and work – the accessibility of food outlets, exercise opportunities and fresh fruit and vegetables can impact on people's choices and behaviour.
- The media and advertising – regular exposure to messaging about unhealthy food can influence the awareness of brands and the choice of food.
- Availability of convenience foods – the modern-day food environment provides easy access to ultra-processed, energy dense food that can contribute to weight gain.
- Inadequate sleep – lack of sleep disturbs hormones which can have an impact on weight. People who sleep less than six hours a night are more likely to gain weight.
- Shift work – disrupted sleep and altered eating patterns can lead to weight gain.

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Body weight and negative stereotypes

People living with overweight and obesity can often experience negativity, bias or bullying relating to their shape or size. This can occur in a wide variety of places, including at work, home, school, public places or health care settings.

Over time, exposure to weight stigma can result in people believing the negative comments directed at them and lead to self-blame, shame, depression, anxiety and low self-esteem.

If you have been impacted by weight stigma or weight bias, speak to your general practitioner (GP) about support options.

Set sustainable behaviour-related goals

When setting goals around weight loss, it is helpful to realise that your weight is not a behaviour.

As a result, it can be more useful and motivating to set sustainable behaviour-related goals instead of weight-related goals.

For example, instead of setting a goal to lose 5kg by a certain date, you could set sustainable behaviour-related goals to:

- go for a 30-minute walk, five times per week
- eat a well-balanced diet, including five serves of vegetables and two serves of fruit every day
- choose wholegrain breads and cereals that provide a more sustained release of energy
- meal prep healthy lunches for the week every Sunday afternoon
- join a regular exercise class at the local gym or a training session at your favourite sports club
- limit your alcohol intake by following the recommendations in the [Australian guidelines](#)
- get enough sleep (adults aged 18 to 64 years should aim for seven to nine hours per night).

By reframing your goals towards sustainable healthy behaviours, you take the pressure off your weight and the number on the scale. This simple change can have a positive impact on your overall health and wellbeing, regardless of whether there is a change in body weight.

Talk to your GP for more information

It is important to remember that losing weight and maintaining weight loss can be complex, but you are not alone. You may require support to address some challenges and it is not uncommon to try a range of strategies before discovering what works best for you.

For more information, talk to your GP about the options available to support you with adopting sustainable healthy behaviours and managing your weight.

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