

Preventing Adult Weight Gain

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How do you feel about gaining 10 to 20 pounds? Researchers say that most Americans probably will within the next 10 years, if they continue their current exercise and eating habits. In fact, the average American gains one to two pounds a year throughout much of adulthood. Yet studies show that practical healthy eating and exercise habits can prevent or minimize this weight gain.

Although adult weight gain is common, you shouldn't consider it normal or healthy. Middle-age weight gain increases the risk of diabetes and heart disease. In one study, for every two pounds men gained, their risk of developing diabetes in the next 10 years rose by over seven percent. A waist increase of over one inch during 10 years correlated with 20 percent of the new diabetes cases in that study.

Weight gain damages your joints, too. When normal-weight young adults become overweight, their risk of developing osteoarthritis of the knees requiring surgery rises three-fold.

The worst consequence of being overweight may be the greater risk of several cancers, especially colon cancer and post-menopausal breast cancer. A gain of more than 45 pounds during adulthood doubles the risk of this type of breast cancer, while smaller weight gains can raise the risk by 20 percent. For breast cancer survivors, weight gain lifts the risk of cancer recurrence and death from 35 percent for small increases to 64 percent for larger ones of about 17 pounds.

The latest edition of the federal Dietary Guidelines for Americans stresses the importance of preventing weight gain like never before. For years, the American Institute for Cancer Research has recommended that adults gain no more than 11 pounds after reaching adulthood.

Changing your balance of calories by 100 fewer calories a day—by consuming less or exercising more—would probably be enough to prevent any gradual yearly weight gain. One recent report says you may have to decrease calorie consumption by 100 calories a day and add 2,000 steps, or a 15-to-20-minute brisk walk. Two easy ways to cut 100 calories from your day are to replace a cup of pasta with vegetables at your dinner table or choose fruit instead of chips when you lunch or snack.

Studies consistently show that your activity level is a key influence on your weight. A new study shows that a 30-minute brisk walk three days a week may be enough to reduce weight gain by close to a pound a year. To prevent weight gain altogether, another study suggests that 45 to 60 minutes a day of walking, yard work or similar activity may be needed.

Of course, your eating habits matter, too. In one large study, middle-aged men and women with a healthy weight, who ate more raw vegetables, fruits and whole grains and less processed meat, high-fat dairy products, and butter or margarine, either maintained their weight or gained much less weight than those who followed the opposite eating patterns. Other studies have shown that whole grains, as well as vegetables and fruits, can independently reduce weight gain and waistline increases. In a study of middle-aged women, those who increased their vegetable and fruit consumption the most had a 28 percent less risk of a major weight gain than those who cut back the most on these nutritious foods.

To switch to a plant-based diet built around vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans, gradually make small changes that you can sustain. Combine these changes with exercise to further reduce your chance of adult weight gain and its health risks.