

Managing your weight

Losing that excess weight is not nearly as impossible as you think ... you just need the right tools and knowledge.

OBESITY is becoming the plague of modern society, as affluence, unhealthy diets and sedentary lifestyles become the norm. With it come the chronic lifestyle diseases - hypertension, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, cancers and other degenerative health problems.

Taking the US as the leading example of such a society, we find that the proportion of overweight adults had increased from 45% (1960) to 70% (2005). One third of these were classified as obese (moderate to severe overweight with increased health risks; with the real problem being excess body fat).

Malaysians are only slightly better off, but are also heading the same way, because we also indulge in fast foods and poor diets, and most hardly exercise. Nearly 40% of adult Malaysians are overweight, including about 10% or more who are obese.

A study done among schoolchildren (six to 17 years) in Kuala Lumpur in 1997 reported that about 10% were overweight, while about 4% were obese. I believe that more than 10 years later, with a higher standard of living, the situation is worse.

The problem is a global phenomenon, except in impoverished countries. The WHO report, Obesity: Preventing and Managing The Global Epidemic , released in 2000, concluded that while obesity is a serious disease, it is not inevitable, and is preventable through lifestyle changes; and that the prevention of adult obesity starts in preventing childhood obesity, as many obese children tend to remain so (and usually worsen) as they become adults.

With overweight/obesity being a perennial and recalcitrant problem for many of us, celebrity diets and weight-loss/slimming salons will never lose their popularity. It will take 10 pages just to list the different kinds of diets being promoted. Weight-loss and slimming salons are big business in every affluent town and city. Just browse through the daily tabloids and you will find many of their advertisements. This tells us that many people are spending a lot of money trying to lose weight. Those who are morbidly obese also go to hospitals to have various types of surgery to help them lose weight.

Managing your weight is easy

I would like to share with you that managing your weight is easy if you understand the basics of how your body works. You don't have to waste money on expensive weight-loss programmes; you don't have to starve yourself and be miserable and weak; and you don't have to torture yourself sweating out at the gym just to lose weight.

I do encourage you to exercise, but it is mainly for your cardiovascular health, for building muscles (which may cause some weight gain) and to improve flexibility. Any weight loss is a bonus. The main strategy to lose weight is through a nutrient-dense diet and having optimum hormone levels in your body.

Avoiding calories is easier than burning them

A beef-burger contains about 300-350 calories and it takes a 70kg man about an hour of brisk-walking at 6km/h to burn the calories away. A fast-food meal with fries and carbonated drink could total 700 calories or more, so you will need two hours to burn the calories off.

The first rule you should remember is not to load the calories into your body. Most of us already have many thousands of excess calories in storage, and we don't need to add to that anymore. Every 3500 calories will add about 1kg to your body weight. One extra burger a day will cause you to gain 1kg every 10 days. Conversely, one burger (or equivalent calories) less a day will allow you to lose 1kg every 10 days. You should save money while you lose weight, and not spend more!

Managing your calories and nutrients

Eating less is easier said than done. Agreed. If losing weight is as simple as skipping a meal a day, then all of us will have no problem maintaining a healthy weight. Unfortunately, why most of us don't succeed and require help is because we cannot resist the hunger pangs and the temptation to eat delicious foods, especially here in Malaysia.

However, if you understand how your body manages your calories and your nutrients, then avoiding the hunger pangs becomes easier.

While the body can store much of the excess calories, most of the nutrients (vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, essential fats and amino-acids, etc) need to be continually replenished for the cells and organs to function well.

Your body will send hunger signals when it requires energy (calories) or nutrients, or both. But most of us want to get rid of excess calories (stored as glycogen and fat), so we should eat nutrient-dense meals (plenty of nutrients but with less calories) so that the body's demand for nutrients is met while the calorie intake is just sufficient to remove the hunger signal. If we want to lose weight, our calorie daily intake must be less than that burnt for the day.

However, the typical Malaysian meal is calorie-rich but nutrient-poor, so you will feel hungry again within two to three hours because your body needs more nutrients. So you eat and pile-on more calories

Calorie banking system

How your body manages your calories is the same as how you manage your money with the help of the bank.

Glucose is your cash. Most of the carbohydrates (rice, bread, roti canai) eaten will be digested to glucose and made available for immediate use (energy production) in the cells.

This is the preferred energy-source. Other energy sources are utilised only after fresh supplies of glucose are depleted despite hunger signals being sent.

Excess glucose is stored in your 'savings or current account' as glycogen, mostly in the liver and muscles (including heart muscles) as these organs will require 'withdrawal' most. And like the bank account, it is readily accessible, and the glycogen is re-converted to glucose.

However, the body still prefers that you get new sources of glucose (food) rather than use the glycogen. When you exercise, the heart and other muscles rapidly consume glucose and will utilise the glycogen stores. Only when the glycogen stores are depleted will the fat store be used.

Further excess glucose (and excess ingested non-essential lipids) will be stored as fat once the glycogen stores are full. Fat is your fixed deposit. Now you understand why even though you are overweight or obese, with thousands of excess calories in storage, your body refuses to burn the fat but sends hunger signals every two to three hours that make you eat and get even fatter.

In summary, the preferred energy source is glucose (cash). Glycogen (savings/current account) is easily accessible when the need arises, but the body still prefers to send hunger signals and acquire fresh supplies of glucose so that the stored glycogen is reserved for future use.

Fat (fixed deposit) is meant for long-term storage and will only be released under 'starvation' conditions, that is, when food is not ingested despite prolonged hunger signals; or during sustained exercise or physical activity after the glycogen stores are depleted. Prolonged starvation will even lead to the breakdown of proteins as an energy-source.

Hormones and metabolism

Some of us do burn calories faster than others, while some of us store calories so easily but don't seem to burn any! The reason is the difference in our metabolism (the workings of the cells and organs during rest and activity, and in fighting or healing damage, degeneration, infections and disease).

Hormones play a crucial role in setting the right 'thermostat' level of metabolic function. For example, the thyroid hormones are the most important in this aspect, and even influence how fast the heart beats. Too much means you will be wasting away and your heart will be overworked, while too little means you will be sluggish, unenergetic, and most of your cells will be underperforming.

Insulin is the other important metabolic hormone. It promotes the storage of glucose and lipids into glycogen and fat respectively. Deficiency (as in type 1 diabetes) or relative deficiency (as in type 2 diabetes, due to insulin-resistance or failure of the cells to respond adequately to the circulating insulin) leads to hyperglycaemia and hyperlipidaemia as glucose and lipids cannot be stored efficiently. There are many other actions of insulin that

tend to lower blood glucose and lipids to healthy levels.

Growth hormones, sex hormones and many other hormones all contribute to healthy metabolism, and therefore to weight control. To achieve and maintain optimum weight, you must also make sure your hormones are at optimum levels.

Exercise and building sufficient muscle mass are natural ways to help the body maintain the right hormone levels. Muscles also burn more calories, and exercise improves insulin-sensitivity.

The nutrient-dense diet

The basis of a nutrient-dense diet is plenty of veggies (fresh, raw and organic if possible) because they contain lots of nutrients but not many calories (except the starchy ones like potatoes; but even potatoes are more nutritious than the polished rice that is our staple food). Go for variety, especially the rich-coloured ones, for their special antioxidants.

Next, enjoy a variety of fresh fruits, but be wary of the amount you consume, because although fruits are nutrient-rich, they are also calorie-rich.

A variety of proteins - plant sources if you are vegetarian, and include some fish and meats if you are not - is essential as building blocks for important components of the body. My favourite source is eggs.

This is the most difficult part - cut down your rice, bread, etc. You can get enough healthy carbohydrates (and fats) from veggies and fruits (eg good fats from olives and avocados). I invite you to change your mindset and think of fruits and veggies as your staple, like I do.

Health experts have increased the recommendation for fruits and veggies to seven to 13 portions daily (five to nine previously) because of the proven health benefits of such a diet. If you comply with this recommendation, you will not need to eat much of the other stuff.

To complete your diet, make sure you have sufficient intake of the different nutrient groups (including essential fatty acids, fibre, probiotics, etc) and any special nutritional needs you may have. And take supplements if these requirements are not met by your diet.

Now that you understand how the body manages your calories and nutrients, achieving and maintaining your optimum weight is not insurmountable anymore. I look forward to seeing my readers looking trim and healthy very soon.

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