

Dieting & Weight Loss: FACTS & FICTION

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WHY DIET?

Most people diet because they think that they are “over”weight. However, the reality in Canada is that:

- One out of five women in Ontario between the ages of 20 and 34 is *underweight*.
- 40 % of 9 year old girls have dieted, despite being within healthy weight ranges.
- 80% of 18 year old women have dieted.

Clearly not all restrictive eaters do so because they are fat. They just *feel* fat, which has become a way to express *feeling bad*.

In a culture where acceptance and self-esteem are often linked to physical appearance, it increasingly appears that we are judged by the way we look. So it makes sense that we want to “fit in” and look our best. In doing so, we feel better about ourselves. Unfortunately, because thinness is a fetish in our culture, we now automatically tend to believe that thin = attractive, successful, in control, healthy, and popular, and that fat = out of control, unattractive, lazy, weak-willed etc.

Of course, this is untrue. Many thin individuals are unhappy, unhealthy and unpopular. Many fat individuals are smart, attractive, successful, healthy and popular. These attributes do not automatically come to us depending on our physical shape and size. They are determined by many things, such as strong self-esteem based on what we can and do achieve, and how we value ourselves and others.

But still we go on restrictive diets to lose weight. Why?

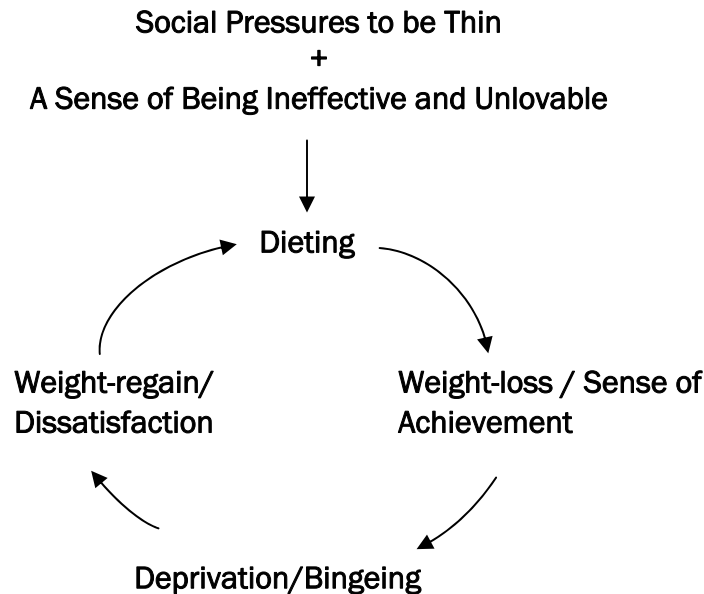
We are flooded with information telling us that we can shape our lives by shaping our appearance. For women in particular, this usually takes the form of dieting. When we feel unloved, ineffective, out of control or unlovable in our lives, we try to take back control.

If we don't have good coping strategies that allow us to understand what the basic problem is, and how we might deal with it, then we tend to displace our unhappiness onto our bodies. And we feel FAT. So we decide to lose weight in order to feel better.

Sometimes we go on a diet because we believe that it will increase our health. (And sometimes we fool ourselves that this is the real reason, not a desire to look “better”.)

FACTS

- Anyone who goes on a restrictive diet will initially lose weight.
- Weight-loss often makes us feel better about ourselves through experiencing a sense of accomplishment and self-control.
- Over time, our bodies become malnourished, and begin to conserve energy, and so a weight plateau is reached.
- We feel deprived of a normal existence as dieting robs us of enjoyable mealtimes and malnourishment induces mood swings and a desire to binge.
- The diet fails and we begin to re-gain the lost weight.
- The initial problems that we were experiencing are still there. And now we also feel like a failure for not losing enough weight, or keeping it off.



- Dieting can lead to lowered self esteem- definitely bad for our health.
- Dieting can lead to increased weight through lowered basal metabolic rate.
- Dieting can lead to bingeing and eating disorders.
- Dieting can cause depression, mood swings, reduced sexual interest, impaired concentration and judgement and, with severe weight loss, heart disorders, elevated cholesterol, anaemia, higher risk of infertility, hair loss, loss of muscle tissue and changes in liver function, amongst other complications.
- The risk of dying from heart disease is 70% higher in those with fluctuating weights than in those whose weight remains stable, regardless of initial weight, blood pressure, smoking habits, cholesterol level or level of physical activity.

WHAT CAN I LOSE ON A DIET?

- Your sense of humour
- Muscle and lean tissue
- Water, resulting in dehydration
- Lots of money on diet products
- Time and energy that could have gone into doing something that would give you lasting self-esteem

DOES THIS MEAN THAT IT IS OKAY TO BE FAT?

Yes and no: human bodies come naturally in a range of sizes, weights and shapes. We inherit a genetic set-point around which, with healthy lifestyles, our weight will fluctuate a few pounds. Some people will naturally be thinner, a larger number will naturally be average and another group will naturally be fatter. It is healthiest to remain at *your* natural set-point weight. There is no magic way to determine your natural weight. Normal eating and physical activity over a six month to one year period will allow your metabolism to settle and your weight to stabilise. The answer then, is that although your natural body-weight may not be your ideal, *that* is the weight at which you are going to be healthiest. And when we are healthy, we have the energy and vitality to live our lives to the fullest, and to look our best.

Don't weigh your self-esteem.
It's what's inside that counts...

TOP TEN REASONS TO GIVE UP DIETING

10 Diets don't work. Even if you lose weight, you will probably gain it all back.

9 Diets are expensive. By not buying special diet products, you could save enough to get new clothes, which would improve your outlook right now.

8 Diets are boring. People on diets talk and think about food and practically nothing else. There's a lot more to life.

7 Diets don't necessarily improve your health. Like the weight loss, health improvement is temporary. Dieting can actually cause health problems.

6 Diets don't make you beautiful. Very few people will ever look like models. Glamour is a look, not a size.

5 Diets are not sexy. Taking care of your body helps you feel and look your best.

4 Diets can turn into eating disorders. The obsession to be thin can lead to anorexia, bulimia, bingeing and compulsive exercise.

3 Diets can make you afraid of food. Food nourishes and comforts us, and gives us pleasure. Dieting can make food seem like your enemy, and can deprive you of all the positive things about food.

2 Diets can rob you of energy. If you want to lead a full and active life, you need good nutrition.

1 Learning to love and accept yourself just as you are will give you self-confidence, better health and a sense of well-being that will last a lifetime.

Adapted: Council on Size and Weight Discrimination Inc. P.O.Box 305, Mt Marion, NY 12456

HOW CAN I LOOK AND FEEL MY BEST?

- Eat healthily and in a non-restrictive manner. This means including all food types in your eating habits. There are no *good* or *bad* foods, just foods with more or less nutritional content. They all have a place in your life.
- Eat at least three meals a day, with snacks in between to meet energy needs.
- Trust your body: learn to identify hunger and satiety, and eat in response to that.
- Be flexible and recognize that it takes time to establish new, healthy habits.
- Include some daily physical activity in your life, but remember that over-exercising can be as harmful as dieting. Make it sustainable and enjoyable.
- Nurture yourself and treat yourself well. This means taking care of your physical as well as emotional needs.
- Learn about yourself: explore who you are and how you can help yourself.
- Challenge fat prejudice in yourself and in others, because it hurts everyone, thin or fat.