

## Health and Weight: Working toward healthy is more important than simply losing weight

Weight is one of those taboo topics... it's really hard to talk about, and probably for good reason. It is a real struggle for many people, our culture has had an unhealthy emphasis on being super-model-thin, and has placed judgment and discrimination on those of us who may not fit that unrealistic cultural ideal. But it is a conversation that is important to have because of the impact that those extra fat cells have on health.

So let's have a little conversation now. Frank and open, with no judgment or shaming or laying of fault. Here is what we know about America's health status and its connection to weight.

It is well-known that being overweight or obese can increase our risk for developing some of the serious and burdensome diseases common in our society: heart disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke, and orthopedic issues. "The simple fact is that excess body fat is a risk factor for most major chronic diseases—it just is. So if weight is an indicator of health risk, it must be treated as such," (Dr. David Katz, founding director of the Prevention Research Center at Yale University, quoted by Ed Cara in his article, *Health At Every Size Movement: What Proponents Say vs. What Science Says*, April 22, 2016.)

However, the link between a person's health and weight status isn't as strong as was once thought, and has most likely been overstated. Recent research has found that there are other factors, such as fitness level, amount of sleep, and a sedentary lifestyle that "are much more relevant predictors of health and chronic disease than being overweight or mildly obese," according to Cara.

Indeed, emphasis on weight loss and the methods offered to the public haven't really done anything but damage in the last few decades. The so-called "yo-yo" dieting process is anything but healthy, and the weight discrimination that overweight folks have faced is also damaging.

And there is a reason that losing weight for the long-term is hard—our bodies are programmed to fight it, and our social environment is set up to encourage us to consume more. "This is not about lapses in individual willpower—it's about a species wrestling with modern challenges for which it has no native adaptations," Katz said. "We're still figuring it out, and clearly have a ways to go."

So now what? The conversation with regards to health and weight should most likely shift from an emphasis on talking about weight and weight loss to one more about adopting healthy lifestyle choices and loving yourself as you are. If the pounds come off with these common-sense methods, great. If not, not so much a big deal. Dr. Charlotte Markey, director of Health Sciences at Rutgers University, in her 2014 book, *Smart People Don't Diet*, suggests some tried-and-true changes that can impact health positively, and may have the side-effect of dropping pounds: getting enough sleep, adjusting diets slowly and indefinitely, and avoiding sugar whenever possible. And the *Healthy At every Size* movement/program has promoted "health-positive behaviors," such as developing a physical activity routine that is sustainable and enjoyable (and not as punishment for being overweight), fostering healthy eating patterns which include a sense of mindfulness (focusing on internal hunger cues, rather than counting calories,) coping with stress, and getting adequate sleep. Equally important is establishing a sense of acceptance and appreciation of one's current body. The underlying idea is that health has much more to do with these things than the numbers on the scale.

And so it circles back to the primary counsel when it comes to improving health: eat healthily (get those fruits and veggies, and avoid highly processed carbohydrates and sugar) become more active (shoot for 10,000 steps/day and keep it up), develop resiliency to stress, and get enough sleep. An emphasis on weight is secondary to creating a healthier lifestyle. And who knows, after adopting these strategies that weight may gradually decrease.

