

Managing Your Weight After a Cancer Diagnosis

A Guide for Patients and Families



Cancer.Net

Doctor-Approved Patient Information from ASCO®



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Founded in 1964, the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO®) is committed to making a world of difference in cancer care. As the world's leading organization of its kind, ASCO represents more than 40,000 oncology professionals who care for people living with cancer. Through research, education, and promotion of the highest-quality patient care, ASCO works to conquer cancer and create a world where cancer is prevented or cured, and every survivor is healthy. ASCO is supported by its affiliate organization, the Conquer Cancer Foundation. Learn more at www.ASCO.org, explore patient education resources at www.Cancer.Net, and follow us on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube.

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ABOUT CANCER.NET

Cancer.Net provides timely, comprehensive, oncologist-approved information from the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO), with support from the Conquer Cancer Foundation. Cancer.Net brings the expertise and resources of ASCO to people living with cancer and those who care for and about them to help patients and families make informed health care decisions. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

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Introduction

More than two-thirds of American adults are overweight or obese, which makes it an important topic for people with cancer and cancer survivors. When a person is overweight or obese, it means that they have too much body fat in relation to lean body tissue, such as muscle. A combination of many factors causes people to become overweight or obese, including genetic, hormonal, environmental, emotional, and cultural factors.



Although many patients want to lose weight or make other healthier lifestyle changes after a cancer diagnosis, others may feel that making changes in their health habits is too difficult. Some people may be discouraged after trying to control their weight for many years before being diagnosed with cancer. However, discussing weight with your doctor or another member of your health care team is an important step in managing your health during and after cancer, no matter your size.

It is never too late to take steps to improve your health—whether you were overweight or obese before cancer or gained weight or lost muscle during or after treatment. Increasing physical activity and lowering your weight, if you are overweight or obese, have many benefits for cancer survivors and could even be linked to a lower risk of the cancer returning or of developing a new cancer. These steps can also help you improve or avoid other weight-related conditions, such as heart disease and diabetes.

This booklet provides basic information for people with cancer and cancer survivors on managing weight, addresses some of the emotional challenges that come with making healthy lifestyle changes, and provides resources that can help.

WEIGHT CHANGES DURING CANCER TREATMENT

When most people think about side effects of cancer treatment, they think about weight loss as one of those side effects. In fact, many patients will gain weight during or after treatment. They may experience other body changes as well, such as gain of body fat and loss of muscle. Weight gain is most common in patients receiving chemotherapy, but patients who receive surgery or hormone therapy can gain weight after a cancer diagnosis.

The reasons that people gain weight during treatment are not completely understood. Some treatments can make people more tired, so that they exercise less. Other treatments may increase appetite or lower metabolism.

Learn more about weight gain as a side effect of cancer at www.cancer.net/sideeffects.

Ways to Lose and Manage Weight

The best time to start a weight loss program or focus on making healthy lifestyle changes varies for each person. For some, a cancer diagnosis may spur them to focus on their health beyond cancer, encouraging them to eat healthier and increase activity. For others, addressing weight and physical activity during or immediately after treatment is just too much to take on.

When many people are diagnosed with cancer, they become active participants in managing their health—learning about the cancer, the treatment options, and the possible side effects and how to cope with them. Consider using the same approach to make diet and activity changes when you are ready.

The first step is to talk with your doctor. Your doctor can calculate your body mass index (BMI; see page 9) and evaluate your overall health and fitness level to find out if you would



benefit from losing weight or making lifestyle changes to maintain your current weight. The methods to help people with cancer manage weight are the same for people who do not have cancer. However, there may be special considerations for people currently receiving cancer treatment, as well as for cancer survivors.

Lifestyle changes

Reducing the calories you eat and drink and increasing physical activity are the main ways to manage or lose weight.

Nutrition. Managing what and how much you eat and drink are important steps in avoiding unnecessary weight gain and losing weight. This means that those who are looking to maintain their weight eat about the same amount of calories that their body needs to function throughout the day. For those who are looking to lose weight, it means eating fewer calories than their body needs. Lowering calories as part of a weight loss program is generally safe for most cancer survivors who need to lose weight. A dietitian can help you learn how to successfully reduce calories.



Physical activity. While exercising may be the last thing on your mind during cancer treatment, starting or continuing aerobic and strength exercises during treatment can improve your quality of life, help reduce fatigue, lessen muscle loss, and prevent the gain of body fat. Participating in exercise and being physically active is considered safe for most people during and after cancer treatment. However, if you have recently received or are receiving cancer treatments that put you at a higher risk for infection, such as a stem cell/ bone marrow transplant, you should avoid community gyms and fitness centers until your immune system has a chance to return to full strength.

Talk with your doctor or another member of your health care team about the level and types of physical activity best for you. You may benefit from working with a physical therapist or exercise specialist, particularly if you have a higher risk of injury due to the

cancer, its treatment, or other health conditions. These professionals can find the best ways for you to increase or maintain your physical functioning.

Behavior change support. For many, being overweight or obese is more complex than simply eating too much and exercising too little. It's important to get support when you are trying to lose weight. Most weight loss programs include more than one session with a dietitian or weight loss specialist to help you make healthy lifestyle changes and stick with them over time.

Weight loss drugs



There is no research showing whether the weight loss drugs that are currently available and approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration are safe for cancer survivors. They are usually only recommended when a combination of diet, exercise, and behavior change support have not worked or if you have other serious health conditions from being obese. To find out if weight loss drugs are an option for you, talk with your health care team about the risks, benefits, and costs.

Weight loss surgery

Weight loss surgery, or bariatric surgery, is a term for a variety of procedures that make a person's stomach smaller. This may be an option if you have a BMI of 40 or higher, or if you have a BMI of 35 or higher and have another serious health condition related to obesity. It's important to remember that these procedures are major surgery and carry risks. In addition, because a person's stomach is smaller after surgery, it still requires long-term lifestyle changes. Usually, counseling is provided to help people understand how their eating and drinking habits will need to change after surgery.

WHAT IS BMI?

Obesity is often measured with body mass index (BMI), the ratio of a person's weight and height. A normal BMI is between 18.5 and 24.9. A BMI between 25 and 29.5 is considered overweight, while a BMI of 30 or higher is obese. You can use the following chart by finding the height closest to yours on the left and following the line across to your approximate weight. BMI is listed at the top.

	NORMAL WEIGHT						OVERWEIGHT						OBESE					
BMI	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	
Height	Body Weight (pounds)																	
4'10	91	96	100	105	110	115	119	124	129	134	138	143	148	153	158	162	167	
4'11	94	99	104	109	114	119	124	128	133	138	143	148	153	158	163	168	173	
5'0	97	102	107	112	118	123	128	133	138	143	148	153	158	163	168	174	179	
5'1	100	106	111	116	122	127	132	137	143	148	153	158	164	169	174	180	185	
5'2	104	109	115	120	126	131	136	142	147	153	158	164	169	175	180	186	191	
5'3	107	113	118	124	130	135	141	146	152	158	163	169	175	180	186	191	197	
5'4	110	116	122	128	134	140	145	151	157	163	169	174	180	186	192	197	204	
5'5	114	120	126	132	138	144	150	156	162	168	174	180	186	192	198	204	210	
5'6	118	124	130	136	142	148	155	161	167	173	179	186	192	198	204	210	216	
5'7	121	127	134	140	146	153	159	166	172	178	185	191	198	204	211	217	223	
5'8	125	131	138	144	151	158	164	171	177	184	190	197	203	210	216	223	230	
5'9	128	135	142	149	155	162	169	176	182	189	196	203	209	216	223	230	236	
5'10	132	139	146	153	160	167	174	181	188	195	202	209	216	222	229	236	243	
5'11	136	143	150	157	165	172	179	186	193	200	206	215	222	229	236	243	250	
6'0	140	147	154	162	169	177	184	191	199	206	213	221	228	235	242	250	258	
6'1	144	151	159	166	174	182	189	197	204	212	219	227	235	242	250	257	265	
6'2	148	155	163	171	179	186	194	202	210	216	225	233	241	249	256	264	272	

Common Challenges to Losing and Maintaining Weight

Before being diagnosed with cancer, you may have already tried several ways to lose weight or increase physical activity and found the results discouraging. This section addresses common beliefs that may prevent people with cancer from pursuing a healthier lifestyle.

“I’VE TRIED EVERYTHING AND JUST CAN’T LOSE WEIGHT.”

Losing weight is challenging. Talk with your doctor about what methods you have already tried, even though it may be uncomfortable to discuss. You may feel you have “failed” because previous attempts to lose weight have not worked. You haven’t failed; you just haven’t found what works for you yet. Talking with your doctor or asking for a referral to a registered dietitian or a weight-loss group can help find the best method for you. Many people find it easier to lose weight if they have a structured program and support.

“I DON’T REALLY WANT TO EXERCISE.”



BILL WIPPERT

Starting an exercise program may seem overwhelming, and cancer treatments can make you tired or cause changes in your mobility. However, participating in physical activity can actually improve your energy level. There are ways to make starting easier. First, pick an activity you enjoy. You're more likely to stick with activities you look forward to. It's important to remember that physical activity comes in many forms, such as walking, dancing, playing actively with your children or grandchildren, or gardening. Second, start small. If you have been very inactive, start with just 10 minutes a day and increase the time gradually. Third, don't do it alone. Participate in physical activity with your family or friends. Or, join an exercise group in your area.



“I’M ALREADY STRESSED ABOUT DEALING WITH MY CANCER.”

Cancer is definitely stressful, partially because there are so many factors that are out of your control. Fortunately, physical activity lowers stress and improves the symptoms of anxiety and depression for many people. In addition, focusing on losing weight and exercising can add some feeling of control to your life.

“THE HARM HAS ALREADY BEEN DONE.”

It is never too late to improve your health. Many studies have shown that people who choose healthy foods and exercise regularly are at lower risk of having the cancer return or of developing a new cancer. In addition, changing to a healthier lifestyle reduces the risk of other medical problems, such as diabetes and heart disease, which may be more of a threat to your overall health than cancer.

“I ENJOY EATING AND DON’T WANT TO CHANGE MY DIET.”

You can still enjoy the foods you love, but with more balance. For most people, there is no need to participate in an extremely restrictive diet plan. The goal is to eat fewer calories. Even small reductions or changes to what you eat and drink can help you lose weight slowly over time. Working with a dietitian can help you lose weight while eating the foods you enjoy.

INSURANCE COVERAGE FOR WEIGHT LOSS

Private Insurance

As part of the Affordable Care Act, most private insurance companies provide coverage for obesity screening and counseling. These services currently need to be provided through a primary care doctor's office. Additionally, weight loss surgery is often covered by insurance for those who meet the criteria for the procedure. To learn more about the weight loss methods covered by your insurance, talk with your health insurance company or the staff at your doctor's office.

Medicare

Medicare may cover the following weight loss methods, depending on specific guidelines:

- Counseling for obesity provided in a primary care setting
- Medical nutrition therapy for patients with kidney disease or diabetes
- Weight loss surgery for patients who meet the criteria

Medicare does not cover the services of an exercise therapist or trainer, physical exercise classes, or weight loss drugs. Learn more about coverage through Medicare at www.medicare.gov.

Medicaid

Some state Medicaid programs may cover obesity treatment methods. Find out what's covered by your state's Medicaid plan at www.medicaid.gov.

Talking with Your Doctor About Weight

Weight is a sensitive topic to bring up for many people. You may feel uncomfortable talking about it for a variety of reasons. Also, you may feel that you have more important things related to cancer and cancer recovery to discuss during your visits. However, weight is a factor used to manage and improve your health.

Here are some questions you may want to ask a member of your health care team about your weight, whether it is affecting your health, and how you can improve your health through weight management and physical activity:

- Am I at an unhealthy weight?
- How is my excess weight harming my health?
- How will losing weight improve my health?
- How much weight do I need to lose?
- How much weight should I lose each week?
- What programs and treatments are available to help me lose weight?
- Can you recommend professionals who can help me develop a weight loss program?
- Where can I find information on healthy eating?
- Where can I find information on exercise?



Resources to Help Manage Your Weight

The following organizations and websites offer information about obesity, healthy eating, and physical activity:

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA):

ChooseMyPlate.gov

www.choosemyplate.gov

National Institute of Diabetes and

Digestive and Kidney Diseases: Weight Control Information Network (WIN)

www.win.niddk.nih.gov

Obesity Action Coalition

www.obesityaction.org

RESOURCES FOR TRACKING FITNESS AND DIET

USDA: SuperTracker

www.supertracker.usda.gov

In addition, there are numerous commercial websites and mobile applications available for tracking fitness and diet. These can be helpful for tracking weight, calories, and/or physical activity, but talk

with your health care team before you follow any recommendations these applications offer. It's best to use these as a tool to help you follow the recommendations provided by your health care team. Search online or through the app store for your tablet or mobile device to find the best one for you.



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For more information about ASCO's patient information resources, call toll-free 888-651-3038 or e-mail contactus@cancer.net. To order more copies of this booklet, call 888-273-3508 or visit www.cancer.net/estore.

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