Despite spending hundreds of hours and millions of pounds each year on dieting, as a nation we are getting fatter. Quite clearly we are doing something wrong.

So how do we reach and maintain a healthy weight? The key is to stop trying faddy diets and simply start following a healthier lifestyle. By establishing some balance in your life you will soon look and feel a great deal better. And - more crucially - you will be making improvements to your health that can actually last a lifetime!

In fact, the really encouraging news is that maintaining a healthy weight can reduce the risk of a number of serious diseases - including cancer.

What is a healthy body weight?

Most of us use the bathroom scales to help us judge our weight. But, because our bodies come in a variety of shapes and sizes, knowing how much we weigh does not necessarily tell us whether we are a healthy weight or not. Most of us have a good idea of what a healthy weight is - it's one at which we feel good and have plenty of energy. A healthy weight is something we can all achieve.

On a more scientific level, health professionals calculate our ideal weight by working out our Body Mass Index (BMI). To calculate your BMI, convert your height from feet and inches into metres, and your weight from stones and pounds into kilograms. Then divide your weight by your height squared.

The ideal BMI is between 20 and 25. Below 20 is the underweight category, while 25-30 is the overweight category. A BMI of more than 30 is in the significantly overweight or obese range.

For adults, the BMI is a useful indicator of a healthy weight but it is important not to ignore the other obvious signs such as how you feel, how you look, or whether waistbands are getting tighter.

The BMI is not used as the basis of healthy weight ranges for children; or sportsmen and sportswomen who, because of intensive training, may have a high ratio of muscle to fat (muscle is heavier than fat).

A healthy target

World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF UK) advises all adults to avoid being underweight or overweight. Around the world, scientists recommend that we should all aim for a BMI of between 20 and 25 throughout our lives. As well as staying in this healthy weight range, it is important to limit the amount of weight we put on during adulthood to less than 5 kg (11 pounds)*. Studies have shown that adult weight gain itself probably increases the risk of breast cancer.

* This does not apply to pregnant women.

What is the next step?

1. Work out what a healthy weight is for you.
2. Decide how much weight you need to lose/gain.
3. Allow a realistic amount of time in which to achieve your target.
4. Resist the temptation to weigh yourself more than once a week.
5. Set yourself a number of goals along the way.
6. Learn to accept your natural body shape.

The encouraging news is that maintaining a healthy weight can reduce our risk of serious diseases, including cancer.
What is wrong with being overweight?

The message is clear – being overweight can seriously damage your health. Studies have consistently shown that overweight and obese people are at greater risk from a variety of serious illnesses including cancer, coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, adult-onset diabetes and gallstones. Carrying excess weight puts extra pressure on joints and conditions such as osteoarthritis are more common in the very overweight. And the extra strain placed on the body by being overweight mean that the more overweight a person is, the more likely they are to die prematurely.

Is it harmful to be underweight?

Yes, being underweight can cause a number of health problems too. When people are underweight their metabolic rate slows down in order to conserve energy, which tends to leave them feeling lethargic and less inclined to keep physically active. In addition, if your weight is too low, you run the risk of suffering from conditions such as osteoporosis and malnutrition – and for women, it can cause their periods to stop as well.

How do I stay a healthy weight?

Maintaining a healthy body weight is really a question of getting the balance right between the amount of energy we take in (in the form of a healthy diet) and the amount of energy we use. If we regularly consume more calories than our body needs to perform its daily functions (including exercise), we will put on weight. If we regularly consume less calories than our body needs, we will start to lose weight. Put another way:

- If energy in = energy out → body weight stays the same
- If energy in > energy out → body weight increases
- If energy in < energy out → body weight decreases

Body weight and cancer

Studies have shown that:
- If you are overweight you may have an increased risk of cancer in general.
- Being obese increases the risk of cancer of the endometrium (lining of the womb) in women.
- Being obese is also thought to increase the risk of breast cancer (in post-menopausal women) and cancer of the kidney.
- Being obese may also increase the risk of cancers of the gallbladder and colon.

Avoid being underweight or overweight and limit weight gain during adulthood to less than 5 kg (11 pounds).

This factsheet about healthy body weight gives information on one of fourteen Diet and Health Recommendations for the Prevention of Cancer. These recommendations were developed from WCRF/AICR’s landmark report: Food, Nutrition and the Prevention of Cancer: a global perspective (1997). This report reviewed thousands of leading research studies from around the world and led to a set of clear guidelines for members of the public to follow. Since then, a great deal of new evidence has accumulated and WCRF/AICR are working on the production of a second report, due to be published in 2006.

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