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WEIGHT PROBLEMS IN TEENS

Being overweight as a teenager is uncomfortable both physically and emotionally. TV ads promise us many “miracle products” that, unfortunately, do NOT bring about safe and lasting weight loss. The bottom line is we need to burn more calories than we take in. The way we gain or lose weight has to do with our metabolism or the way our body burns calories. Certainly our genes play a major role in determining our individual metabolism. Does this mean if weight problems run in the family we might as well give up trying to be fit and trim? Of course not! But it may mean we have to work at it a little harder.

“Dieting” has been proven **not** to work for lasting weight reduction; the more you deprive yourself of the foods you want to eat, the more likely it is you won’t be able to “stick to it” and you will binge. Starving yourself causes your metabolism to slow down and – surprise! – fewer calories are burnt and you lose weight more slowly, if at all. When calories are cut back too much you lose water and muscle tissue; muscles are where calories are burned, so you want **more** muscle tissue, not less! With every new diet you lose more muscle tissue, making it even harder in the future to lose body fat. And losing body fat is “where it’s at!” for long-term weight loss.

So how **can** you successfully lose weight? There are some safe and effective steps you can take:

- Become more active. Regular exercise that causes your heart rate to be elevated for 30-40 minutes 5 days a week is ideal, but start slowly if you are not in the habit of exercising. Don’t pick an activity that you don’t like (you will be miserable, and unlikely to keep it up) or can’t do regularly (like swimming if there is no pool nearby). You should be able to do the exercise without getting out of breath – examples are walking, biking, swimming, low-intensity dance, etc. Find an exercise buddy – it’s more fun to do it with someone else, and you can encourage each other!
- Learn how to “eat healthy” – your goal is to eat regular meals and snacks and not to feel deprived, while making healthier food and portion-size choices. Learn to be a “label reader”, learn which foods are higher or lower in fat (meats are higher in fat than most fruits, vegetables and grains; you need adequate protein

especially in adolescence but may be able to make wiser protein choices); and learn how to prepare foods in a way that does not increase the fat content (examples: bake rather than fry, use cooking spray rather than a glob of butter in the pan; skin chicken before cooking, etc.). Did you know that french fries have **4** times as many calories as a baked potato (watch the amount of butter and sour cream! Use lower-fat spreads and non-fat sour cream or fat-free yogurt)? Did you know that potato chips have **8** times as many calories as a baked potato?

- Get in the habit of drinking plenty of water. Water has no calories, and it fills you up. Other fluids are milk, juice or soda. Milk, juice and regular sodas have calories so you don't want to drink many of them. Non-fat or reduced-fat milk (1% or 2%) has fewer calories (from fat) than whole milk, and are recommended. Diet soda has no nutritional value. One once in a while is ok.
- Beware of the TV! Not only are you just sitting there, burning a minimum of calories, but most of us tend to "snack" in front of the tube. And then those food commercials! – all items look so good that even if you aren't hungry they make you think you are.
- Don't "deprive" yourself completely of foods you love; learn to eat smaller portions of high-fat/high calorie foods, and eat them less often. For example, at a birthday party, **go ahead** and have a piece of cake! Just don't grab the biggest piece. Eat it slowly and enjoy it – no guilt! When the hostess offers to wrap up a few pieces for you to take home, politely say "no thank you – but I really enjoyed it!"
- Be aware of emotional eating – do you eat to celebrate or to reward yourself? Or when you're bored? Or when you are unhappy? Learn other ways to deal with emotions. Get emotional support from family and friends. Nagging a person about their weight is not helpful. Encourage them in their efforts to make **healthy changes**. It can be difficult to feel good about yourself if you are overweight in a society that values thinness. Feeling good about yourself is important for your over-all happiness and success.

Here are some books that can help you learn to make healthier choices and changes in your eating and exercise habits:

Fit or Fat by Covert Bailey

How to Get Your Kids to Eat...But Not Too Much, by Ellyn Satter. There are special chapters on teens and eating disorders.

Jane Brody's Nutrition Book

American Heart Association Low-Fat, Low Cholesterol Cookbook

New American Diet Cookbook by William & Sonja Conner

Sports Nutrition Guidebook by Nancy Clark

Winning Weight Loss for Teens by Joanne Ikeda

Quick and Healthy by Brenda Ponichtera

Coping With Weight Problems by Paul Gelinis