



Why Losing Weight Without Meaning to Can Be Risky to Your Health

So many people these days are preoccupied with diets and shedding pounds. But did you know that losing a significant amount of weight – when you’re not trying to lose weight – can be dangerous to your health? Unintended weight loss is a serious medical concern. It can:

- decrease your body’s ability to fight infection,¹
- be a symptom of an underlying medical condition,¹ and
- have a negative effect on your treatment for an illness or other medical conditions.¹

A healthy appetite coupled with good nutrition is vital to your health, energy and sense of well-being.

Some people don’t realize they are losing a significant amount of weight because it happens so gradually. It’s also a common myth that appetite loss is a normal part of aging and illness.



A healthy body weight depends on age, height, activity level, the amount of food you eat and physical condition as well as appropriate proportions of lean muscle and body fat.

You may be losing weight too quickly and need to see your doctor if, without trying²:

- you have lost 5 percent of your body weight within 6 months or
- you have lost 10 percent of your body weight in the past year.

For example, if you weighed 150 pounds a year ago and weigh 135 pounds now, you have lost 10 percent of your body weight.

The signs of unintended weight loss can be easily overlooked. Caregivers or family members should monitor the weight of an individual at risk for unintended weight loss. Working with the patient, family members should help him or her keep a weekly weight log. Also, make note of any skipped meals or significant amounts of uneaten food. Share this information at visits to the doctor and registered dietitian.



Risk Factors for Unintended Weight Loss

Appetite loss is a significant risk factor for unintended weight loss. It does not have to be part of the aging process. “Anorexia of aging” is a medical term for inadequate food intake due to lack of appetite in older persons, regardless of chronic illness or disease. Food may lose its appeal as the senses of taste and smell change with age. Older adults may also be taking medications that have side effects like nausea and severe dry mouth. All these factors can result in loss of appetite. The good news is that older adults who maintain their weight may live a happier and healthier life.

Sometimes unintended weight loss is associated with serious medical conditions. Diseases of the heart, liver or kidney, as well as conditions such as cancer and HIV/AIDS, can result in significant and sometimes life-threatening weight loss. The nausea that may accompany chemotherapy and radiation therapy for cancer also can reduce appetite. This may result in significant weight loss. Some medications can cause severe dryness of the mouth or mouth sores that make eating a painful experience. Aging, illness,

prescription drugs and other treatments are not the only potential sources of appetite loss. Physical disabilities and fatigue can make it difficult to shop for and prepare healthy foods.

In addition to appetite loss, unintended weight loss can occur when an illness causes the body’s metabolism to speed up or malfunction. Weight loss and extreme loss of muscle and fat mass associated with serious disease is called cachexia (ka-KEX-ee-a). Many cancers, including lung and liver cancer, are associated with this kind of weight loss. In patients with HIV/AIDS, the body’s immune system triggers a series of chemical reactions in the body as it fights off the infection caused by the AIDS virus. These reactions can lead to severe weight loss or what physicians refer to as HIV/AIDS wasting.





How to Get Back Your Appetite and Gain Healthy Weight

Fortunately, there are effective ways to help stimulate a healthy appetite and manage unintended weight loss.

- **See a physician if you suspect unintended weight loss.** A physician will be able to determine if you or your loved one has unintended weight loss. An accurate medical history is critical for the right diagnosis. If possible, a caregiver or family member should attend these physician visits to ensure all relevant information is provided. It is also a good idea to bring a list of all medications and dose amounts being taken.
- **See a registered dietitian.** A registered dietitian (RD) can develop a personalized eating plan that meets your individual needs. An RD can also address any special dietary requirements you may have. Ask your RD if it is possible to include favorite foods or special holiday dishes in your diet.

- **Make meals a social event.** Appetite can be enhanced by a comfortable, quiet eating environment. It also helps if the food is visually appealing and consists of different textures and varying temperatures. People eat better when they don't eat alone. Make mealtime a time to be with friends or family members.
- **Get moving.** Many dietitians recommend keeping active as a way to maintain healthy weight. Activities such as walking and gardening can help build a healthy appetite.
- **Consider appetite stimulants.** There are several appetite stimulant drugs that physicians may prescribe that can help patients with serious conditions, such as cancer and HIV/AIDS, to regain appetite and lost weight.

It is important to remember that body chemistry is as different as fingerprints. Working with a physician and an RD is essential to achieving a healthy weight for you or your loved one. Everyone's diet may be different, but the basics are the same: A healthy appetite and good nutrition are important first steps on the road to better health.



Tips to Remember

- Keep a weight diary by recording your weight on a weekly basis.
- Allow enough time to finish eating a meal.
- If filling up quickly is a problem, eat 5 or 6 small meals a day.
- Keep a supply of high-calorie snack foods such as crackers with cheese or peanut butter.
- Prepare food with differing textures and of varying temperatures to make meals more appetizing.
- Enjoy meals in a pleasant environment. Eat with friends or family members when possible.
- Include favorite foods or ethnic dishes often.
- Keep easy-to-prepare foods on hand for quick meals.
- Increase your physical activity; try walking or gardening.

If you are continuing to lose weight after trying some of these tips, speak with your physician or a registered dietitian today.

To find an RD in your area, go to www.eatright.org

References: 1. Grinspoon S, Mulligan K, for the Department of Health and Human Services Working Group on the Prevention and Treatment of Wasting and Weight Loss. Weight loss and wasting in patients infected with human immunodeficiency virus. *Clin Infect Dis.* 2003;36(suppl 2):S69-S78. 2. Polsky B, Kotler D, Steinhart C. HIV-associated wasting in the HAART era: guidelines for assessment, diagnosis, and treatment. *AIDS Patient Care STDS.* 2001;15:411-423.

Lost Your Appetite? Losing Weight and Don't Know Why?

Understanding Unintended Weight Loss



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