

A Weight Loss Misunderstanding

Weight loss is one of the most misunderstood and most sought after portions of the fitness world, and I think that it's something that merits a good deal of discussion. All of you trainers out there have no doubt been asked countless times by clients and gym goers about shedding unwanted pounds, but the answer is really not so simple so I'm going to explore some of the sidebars attached to the question, "How can I lose some weight?"

There are two ways to lose weight. One way is to decrease your total daily caloric intake and the other way is to increase your daily caloric expenditure. The best practice one can undertake is not to be too extreme on either end of the spectrum, but rather to combine decreased caloric intake with increased caloric expenditure so as to create a calorie deficit.

The first thing one needs to do is to figure out their basal metabolic rate (BMR). An individual's BMR refers to the daily amount of calories required for that individual to carry on normal daily functions. The most accepted formula by medical professionals to figure out BMR is the Harris-Benedict formula. For men the formula goes $66 + (6.3 \times \text{weight in pounds}) + (12.9 \times \text{height in inches})$ while for women the formula is $655 + (4.3 \times \text{weight in pounds}) + (4.7 \times \text{height in inches}) - (4.7 \times \text{age in years})$.

Say we have a woman who is 5' 8", weighs 120 pounds and is twenty years old. If we plug her vitals into the formula we would find that her BMR is 1,396 calories. This means that this woman requires 1,396 calories per day to carry on her normal functions. It also means, that this woman were to just sit around and do nothing for the day her body would burn 1,396 calories which is about 60 calories per hour. This is, of course, an imperfect formula, but it does give a very ballpark figure which is really what you need to get started.

It is also very helpful to know that 3,500 calories make up one pound, and thus you need to burn 3,500 calories to lose one pound. Knowing all of this, an individual then needs to examine their diet and activity level. A good idea is to keep a weekly food journal of all of the foods consumed in a week. Use the food journal to calculate your daily calorie intake for the week and then come up with a daily average. For the sake of ease we will say the 120-pound woman has been taking in 11,200 calories per week for a 1,600 calories per day average. Let's also say she does little to no exercise. If we look at her BMR, which we will round up to 1,400 calories per day and then at her intake of 1,600 calories per day, it is not difficult to see that she is slowly gaining weight since she is burning less calories than she is taking in. She has a daily excess of about 200 calories which comes to about 1,400 per week or about 1.5 pounds per month. This is the most common form of weight gain, slow and gradual.

She may not notice that 1.5 pound gain at the end of the month, but if she continues that rate for a year she will gain 18 pounds. I am of course using perfect numbers and unchanging variables for the sake of illustrating my point. If you do the math it would show that in ten years this woman would weigh 300 pounds, and on paper this is true, but in real life it's hardly likely. The numbers do, however, make the point that in order for this woman to lose weight she is going to need to consume fewer calories than she burns each day. If she takes in 1,200 calories per day while burning 1,400 she will then be losing 1.5 pounds per month.

If you are just a regular person looking to lose some weight then the first thing you should do is try to get your caloric intake as close to your calculated BMR as you can. The easiest way to do this is to look at your food journal and cut out all of the non-essential calories. For example, maybe you drink two cans of regular soda per day. This would account for about 300 calories. If you were to just switch to diet soda or water you will have eliminated 300 calories per day from your diet. Most people will find that they do not need to make changes in their meals (unless they are eating large quantities of fast food for meals or are absolutely gorging themselves) but just need to substitute high-calorie snacks with low-calorie snacks.

Making slight dietary changes is far safer and far easier to stick to than going to something extreme and unsafe like a no carb diet. A no carb and all fat diet may be very successful for a few months and has indeed shown to work in taking off weight for a short period of time. However, not only is sticking to such a diet very hard, but in the long run it is also unsafe. Your weight may be going down which is great, but your cholesterol and risk for arteriosclerosis are going through the roof at the same time. You could also be depriving yourself of a great number of essential nutrients, vitamins and minerals unless you are using all sorts of supplements. The dietary adjustment is the first part of the battle. The next part, and most important part, is raising your activity level.

Many people feel that they are being very active while in fact they are not. A good example is a woman I spoke to once who said she was frustrated about not being able to lose weight. She had not made any changes in her diet, but she said she was walking 2 miles per day. Walking two miles at a moderate pace (which I am sure is the pace she was walking) burns only about 200 calories. Most people burn around 130 calories just sitting on the couch for two hours. That two-mile walk did not even burn off the calories of two cans of soda, however, combine the walk with cutting out the soda and you have 500 calories. My recommendation is to try for cutting 250 daily calories from your diet while increasing your activity level by 250 calories daily. This would create a 500-calorie per day deficit and if done consistently this comes to one pound per week. One pound per week is a good goal, as it is very traumatic on the body to lose too much weight too quickly. In time you can, of course, raise that activity level. You can continue to moderately cut more calories out, but really concentrate on increasing the amount you are burning each day.

It would also be helpful to have access to a scale that can measure bodyfat percentage. Ultimately what you really want is to see your bodyfat percentage going down. Your weight could stay at 150 pounds, but if your bodyfat level has gone from 20% to 15% then you have made a great deal of progress.

I also want to note that this aerobic activity should be coupled with at least three days per week of weight training. Developing greater lean muscle mass is the best way to raise your BMR since muscle tissue is active as opposed to fat which just sits and deposits.

It also merits special mention to note that the biggest reason why people tend to gain the weight back that they have just worked off is because as soon as they have reached their goal of losing weight they then cease to do the things they did to lose that weight and return to their old lifestyle. In order to be a success you need to make a permanent lifestyle change.

There are no quick fixes.

The numbers don't lie, and sometimes if you put your progress on paper and track it in a journal it can make your progress much more real to you and help you to stay motivated and to know just what you need to do in terms of diet and daily exercise. The absolute most important thing is to remain consistent. If you deviate from your routine then you will see a slump in progress, but if you stick with it for the long haul and are patient then you will see great results.

This article was taken from Personal Training Today,
an online personal training magazine- June 1, 2005 edition
(article was written by Abe Achenbach)