Improving Your Health
Tips for African American Men and Women

You do not have to stop eating chocolate cake or start running marathons to improve your health. Making small but steady changes in your eating and physical activity habits, over time, may help you lose weight if you need to, feel better, and improve your health. The information below can help you start to change your physical activity and eating habits. When you make changes to improve your health, you may also move your friends and family to do the same.

Am I overweight?
Overweight and obesity in adults can be defined using the body mass index (BMI), a tool that measures weight in relation to height. The table on the next page shows how BMI calculation works. A BMI of 18.5 to 24.9 refers to a healthy weight, a BMI of 25 to 29.9 refers to overweight, and a BMI of 30 or higher refers to obesity.

For more information about evaluating your body weight, read the Weight-control Information Network (WIN) fact sheet Weight and Waist Measurement: Tools for Adults.

What if I think I look fine? How do I start to lose weight and improve my health?
Even if you are considered overweight according to charts and measures, you may like the size and shape of your body and not want to lose weight. Your friends and family may think you look great too. But the health benefits of getting fit and eating well are clear. Once you decide to lose weight, your loved ones may want to join you on your journey to better health.

Am I risking my health by being overweight?
Being overweight can be dangerous to your health. If you are considered overweight or obese, you are more likely to develop:

• type 2 diabetes
• high blood pressure
• heart disease
• certain forms of cancer

You can help lower your risk for many health problems by losing weight. Losing 5 to 10 percent of your body weight can help improve your health. For example, if you weigh 200 pounds, losing 10 to 20 pounds may help lower your blood pressure and cholesterol level. Slow and steady weight loss of 1/2 to 2 pounds per week is the safest way to lose weight.

How do I start to lose weight and improve my health?
You may find it helpful to participate in a weight-loss program. If so, talk with a health care professional about controlling your
weight before you decide on a program.
Doctors do not always address issues such as healthy eating, physical activity, and weight management during general office visits. It is important for you to start the discussion in order to get the information you need. Even if you feel uncomfortable talking about your weight with your doctor, remember that he or she is there to help you improve your health.

When you are ready to start toward a healthy weight and improve your health, try to:

- Be more physically active.
- Eat healthier.

**Table 1: Body Mass Index**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Height (feet-inches)</th>
<th>Weight (Pounds)</th>
<th>Normal</th>
<th>Overweight</th>
<th>Obese</th>
<th>Extreme Obesity</th>
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<td>28</td>
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<td>196</td>
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</table>

Be More Physically Active

Regular, moderate-intensity physical activity can be fun and help you feel great. When you share physical activity with your friends and family, it can also be a social event. Perhaps members of your church or place of worship would be interested in starting an exercise program at the place where you gather.

Make it your goal to try to do at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most, preferably all, days of the week. You may need to be physically active for more than 30 minutes a day to help you lose and keep off extra weight.

Note: If you are a man over age 40 or a woman over age 50, or if you have chronic health problems such as heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, osteoporosis, or obesity, talk to your doctor before starting a vigorous physical activity program.

What is moderate-intensity physical activity?

Examples of moderate-intensity physical activity include:

- Walking 2 miles in 30 minutes.
- Bicycling 5 miles in 30 minutes.
- Dancing fast for 30 minutes.

Sometimes starting and sticking with a physical activity program can be a challenge. Figuring out how to beat your physical activity roadblocks may make it easier for you to get and stay active.

Beat your physical activity roadblocks!

If you...

Do not have child care.

Do not have time or are too busy to be physically active.

Do not like or do not want to exercise.

Do not feel safe being physically active in your neighborhood.

Then try...

Sharing physical activities such as walking, biking, or playing tag with your child each day.

Doing 10 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity three times a day, or putting more energy than normal into activities like housework, yard work, and playing with the kids.

Doing something you enjoy, like dancing to the radio or planning active outings with a friend, family member, or group.

Forming a group of people to walk, jog, or bike together, working out with videos in your home, or walking in a shopping mall.
Tips for Active Women
You can be active and still keep your hairstyle. Talk to your hair stylist about a hair care routine and style that fit your active life. You might try wearing:
- a natural hairstyle
- a style that can be wrapped or pulled back
- a short haircut
- braids, twists, or locs

Tips for Active Men
Sometimes even the most active guys can be sidelined by lack of time, loss of motivation, and even injury. Here are some ways to keep men moving:
- All types of activity count. In addition to “working out,” activities like chores, walking the dog, and playing outside with the kids add to your daily total.
- When you do work out, think of it as three parts: the warm-up, the workout, and the cool-down. Warm up by moving your muscles for 5 to 10 minutes. For example, try jumping jacks or push-ups. Now you are ready to work out. Finally, cool down by walking slowly for 5 to 10 minutes. Do light stretching after your warm-up and cool-down routines. This may help keep you injury-free.
- Try going to the gym with a friend. Or get some friends together for a pick-up basketball or soccer game. Working out with friends may help keep you motivated to stay active. Signing up for a charitable 5K walk or run may also keep you motivated and on track.

Eat Healthier
When you begin to change your eating habits to improve your health, try to:
- Make healthier food choices.
- Eat just enough food for you.

Make Healthier Food Choices
A healthy eating plan includes a variety of foods from every food group.

In January 2005, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) jointly released the updated Dietary Guidelines for Americans. These new guidelines outline recommendations to promote health and reduce the risk of chronic disease through nutritious eating and physical activity.

The new guidelines encourage Americans over 2 years of age to eat a variety of nutrient-dense foods. Recommended items include fruits, vegetables, fat-free or low-fat milk and milk products, lean meats, poultry, fish, beans, eggs, nuts, and whole grains such as brown rice and whole-wheat bread. The guidelines also recommend a diet low in saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars.

Making healthy food choices may seem difficult when you do not have time to cook or your family wants fast food. However, you and your family and friends can make healthier food choices. Try these tips:
- Keeping a bowl of fruit on the table, bags of mini carrots in the refrigerator, and boxes of raisins in the cupboard are simple ways to eat more fruits and vegetables.
• Try not to keep a lot of sweets like cookies, candy, or soda in the house, car, or workplace. Too many sweets can crowd out healthier foods.

• If you do go to a fast food restaurant, try a salad or a grilled chicken sandwich (not fried) instead of a burger.

Social gatherings can be tricky when you are trying to make healthy choices. Try these ideas:

• Encourage members of your place of worship to bring healthier food options to events.

• Watch the amount of alcohol you drink. Alcohol contains no nutrients but plenty of calories. If you want to drink alcohol, try a light beer or a low-calorie spritzer (small amount of wine added to club soda).

*For more information about recommended daily intakes from various food groups, visit http://www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines.

Do I need to drink milk?

A healthy eating plan includes a variety of foods that provide all of the nutrients the body needs. Milk is a good source of calcium. If you cannot digest lactose (the sugar found in milk), there are ways you can get calcium without drinking milk.

• Drink low-fat or fat-free “lactose-reduced” milk, or calcium-fortified soy-based beverages.

• Choose low-fat yogurt or reduced-fat hard cheeses like low-fat cheddar.

• Eat dark leafy vegetables like collard greens or kale.

• Eat canned fish with soft bones like salmon.

Eat Just Enough for You

A healthy eating plan calls for making healthy food choices and eating just enough for you. Larger amounts of food have more calories. Eating more calories than your body needs may lead to weight gain.
Learning about the serving sizes of foods can help you eat just enough for you. Try to measure your food for a few days. This can help you learn to recognize what one serving of a food, such as 1/2 cup of rice, looks like on your plate.

To lose weight, learn to eat fewer calories. Do this by selecting foods that are lower in fat and calories from each food group. For example, choose low-fat cheese and extra lean meat. Also, choose plenty of vegetables. They are lower in calories and fat than other foods and can help you feel full.

**Keeping Your New Habits**

The path to improving your eating and physical activity habits is not easy. But do not give up. Remember, sensible eating and regular physical activity, followed over time, are key to a healthy body, mind, and spirit!

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**Sneaking In Fruits and Vegetables!**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If you love...</th>
<th>Try this...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pizza</strong></td>
<td>You can still enjoy the occasional pizza, but go for the more healthy option. Try a vegetable pizza with three or more vegetable toppings, such as bell peppers, onions, and mushrooms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fast Food Hamburgers</strong></td>
<td>Order a child-size hamburger meal. If that does not satisfy you, order a burger without the sauce and share the fries with a friend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cereal for Breakfast</strong></td>
<td>Add some fresh fruits like strawberries, blueberries, or bananas to your cereal. You will add some sweetness to your breakfast while sneaking in a serving of fruit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>French Fries</strong></td>
<td>Try mashed potatoes made with fat-free milk, a baked potato topped with a vegetable or fruit salsa, or a salad.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dessert</strong></td>
<td>Have a plate of fresh fruit with low-fat or fat-free cream. The natural sweetness from the fruit might satisfy your cravings for something sweet.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Remember, sensible eating and regular physical activity, followed over time, are key to a healthy body, mind, and spirit!
Additional Reading From the Weight-control Information Network


Additional Resources

*MyPyramid.* This interactive website from USDA has detailed information about healthy eating and physical activity. It allows users to create a personalized eating and activity plan. Available at [http://www.mypyramid.gov](http://www.mypyramid.gov).