

A Healthy Plan for Gaining Weight

With obesity reaching epidemic levels in the United States, it's no surprise that most of the focus on weight is directed toward losing it. But not everyone's trying to shed extra pounds. For individuals who are underweight, the goal of gaining weight can seem just as daunting and difficult – and often does not receive the same level of attention or concern from the friends and family that surround them. Many people wish they could be so lucky to have such a problem, but for those that struggle to gain weight, it is no easy task.

Two Not-So-Magic Ingredients: Food and Exercise

Weight gain is based on the same principle as weight loss and can be every bit as challenging for someone trying to put on some healthy pounds. The principle behind weight gain has to do with *caloric balance* – in other words, consuming more calories than are expended. This seems obvious (and appears easy to those who tend to gain weight easily), but the key is to gain weight that is predominantly lean muscle and not just extra fat.

The two parts of the equation for weight gain (like weight loss) are **food** and **exercise**. One might think that exercise will only burn *more* calories and make weight gain more difficult, but exercise will not only help to increase the body's physical size, but may also stimulate the appetite later, making eating those extra calories easier. Both *what you eat* and *how you exercise* work together to help you gain weight: one providing the nutrient building blocks to help build new healthy muscle tissue, and the other providing the “stress” on those muscles through weight training that stimulates their growth.

The Goal

How many pounds a person needs or wishes to gain should be determined based on what is healthy for the physical needs of his or her body and its many functions. A good starting point is determining what an approximate ideal body weight – called the desirable body weight – should be for good health. You can use a simple tool to calculate your estimated desirable body weight. For a medium boned, adult women, take 100 pounds for the first 5 feet of height and then add 5 pounds for every additional inch over 5 feet to the initial 100 pounds. For example, a 5 feet, 5-inch adult female would have an average desirable body weight of 125 pounds.

For a medium boned, adult male, take 106 pounds for the first 5 feet of height and add 6 pounds for every additional inch over 5 feet. Therefore, a 5 feet, 11-inch adult male would have an average desirable body weight of 172 pounds. Add or subtract 10% of the final average weights (women and men) for a large- or small-boned body frame, respectively. This provides a goal weight to aim for and you can determine exactly how many pounds you're working toward by subtracting the desirable body weight by your present weight.

Example: A 5 foot, 4-inch medium-boned adult female weighs 110 pounds and needs to gain weight. Her desirable body weight is 120 pounds. Her goal is to gain 10 pounds.

This may seem like a strange place to start, but just like with dieting to lose weight, it is harder to get to the goal if you don't start out knowing what the goal is.

How Long?

Everyone wants things to happen instantly. Unfortunately, there is no quick way (without putting rocks in your pockets) to gain weight in a healthy way without making a commitment and understanding that it will take some time. *A reasonable goal for weight gain is approximately 1 pound per week.*

Intensive body builders or very large-boned individuals may be able to aim for up to 2 pounds per week, but most people can gain at a steady rate of ½ to 1 pound per week. This is partly due to the fact that it is difficult to consume enough healthy extra calories in a week to put on lean tissue, in addition to the fact that building new muscle tissue just takes time.

Everyone's body responds differently, so the actual rate of weight gain will vary from person to person.

Food

One pound is equal to 3,500 calories. Therefore, in order to gain a pound, an extra 3,500 calories need to be consumed *above the normal calories eaten in the diet* and above those expended in exercise. Many individuals who strive to gain weight have trouble consuming this many extra calories in a short amount of time and therefore, it is easier to spread the extra calories out through snacks and extra meals over the course of each week.

Eat and Eat Often

In order to gain weight, you need to eat more calories. Many people find it difficult and uncomfortable to overstuff themselves at the traditional schedule of three meals a day. Therefore, eating 3 to 4 healthy-sized snacks between meals – almost *mini-meals* in themselves – can help add calories to the diet in a way that is manageable and appealing. Try to eat every 2 ½ to 3 hours throughout the day. This may require some advanced planning to make sure that when it's time to eat, there's food available.

Eat Nutrient Dense Foods

Fill up at meals and snacks with healthy foods, but not necessarily foods with empty calories. A nutrient dense food is one that is high in vitamins and minerals, but also higher in calories. Carrot and celery sticks in a bag are a good choice for someone trying to lose weight, but while they may be filling to the

stomach, their caloric content is low. Instead try celery with peanut butter, crackers and low-fat cheese, or even a sandwich with sliced turkey and vegetables, or a traditional peanut butter and jelly on whole grain bread. These can be good snacks *and* they are higher in calories than plain fruits or vegetables. Potato chips are not as good of a choice, since they are high in calories and fat, there's not much more nutrition there! Be inventive with snacking on nutrient dense foods.

The Overall Diet

While gaining weight does require eating more calories, it doesn't mean you have to turn to a junk-food diet to get there. The general recommendation for weight gain is the same diet recommended for all Americans and based on the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2000* and the *USDA Food Guide Pyramid*. Aim for the high ends on the number of suggested servings.

The general recommendation for good health and optimal nutrition is a diet rich in whole grains, fruits and vegetables, with good sources of low-fat protein and calcium. Moderate fat intake of 30% or less of total calories is advised. Carefully planning 5-6 meals and snacks each day can increase the calories and keep the diet full of vitamins, minerals and other nutrients that will stimulate healthy weight gain while protecting the body's overall health.

In eating fat, aim for the healthy varieties like monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. Monounsaturated fats are found in foods like avocados, olive and canola oils, and nuts. Polyunsaturated fats are found in flax seed oil, nuts, salmon and other deep-sea fish. Regular tofu (*not* low-fat or lite) is a good source of both protein and fat. Stick with low-fat items, not the fat-free items, for a few extra calories. A handful of nuts or sliced avocado on a piece of bread can be a healthy snack option with extra calories.

Some people without risk factors for cardiovascular disease may be able to tolerate a slightly higher fat content in their diet, which makes increasing calories even easier. Risk factors of heart disease include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, smoking or early heart-related deaths in family members.

A consistent diet of 3,000 to 4,000 calories a day will ensure weight gain in most individuals, but if this seems difficult to calculate, just try to add 500 to 1000 extra calories per day. This is equivalent to a couple big handfuls of nuts or a nutrient dense smoothie and a sandwich or 2-3 extra slices of pizza over the course of a day. Over a week, this can result in 1 to 1 ½ pounds gained.

Remember, good health is still the larger goal. Therefore, the dietary recommendations for weight gain are just more of the foods that give good nutrition and nourishment. Increasing the calories is not a license to go crazy on fried foods or gallons of ice cream, but there is an opportunity to increase the

serving size and frequency of consuming your favorite healthy foods. They are the same recommendations with a different approach.

And don't forget the water. Aim for 8 cups a day or more. Muscle is over 70% water, the body overall is over 60% water and we need water for nearly every single function in the body. Water helps transport our nutrients, keep the blood pressure regulated and the blood vessels clean.

Exercise

While increasing calories and eating well are essential for healthy weight gain, exercise is another very important part of the equation. In working to gain weight, the goal is to gain lean muscle and not just fat. This requires strength-training exercises like those done with fitness equipment, free weights, or even the resistance of your own body weight with exercises like push-ups and pull-ups.

As with any exercise program, it is always advisable to get medical clearance from your health care professional before beginning a new fitness regimen.

The general recommendation for weight gain is to do resistance training – also called weight lifting, strength training or anaerobic exercise – three times per week. If strength training is new to you, you may need to work up to three times per week and may also want to consult a certified health and fitness instructor or qualified personal trainer for individual instructions and a personalized training schedule.

The idea is to focus on all the large muscle groups like the biceps, triceps, thigh and hamstring muscles, glutes (buttocks), abdomen, back, and calves. With as little as 6-8 repetitions on 8 focused exercises, you can make significant changes in strength and encourage muscle growth and healthy weight gain. Each exercise should be set at a weight that makes the muscle very fatigued by the 7th or 8th repetition in order to promote muscle growth. Research has shown dramatic increases in strength and muscle tissue with as little as 20 minutes of focused strength training 3 times per week!

Be sure to rest about 48 hours between strength training sessions on the same muscle group, since it is during the “rest” period that the tissue is building and repairing the muscle. Add weights a little at a time as they become easier to lift, and be sure to seek ongoing or periodic assistance from someone who is qualified in fitness training.

The exercise component of weight gain is what turns the extra calories you eat into muscle and not fat. The added benefit – in addition to improved strength, stronger bones and overall improved health – is that since muscle weighs more than fat, you can achieve your desirable body weight with less fat and more shapely musculature.

What About Weight-Gain Supplements?

While people definitely do not *need* supplements in order to gain weight, for some individuals who have a hard time eating enough calories, they may help make the process easier. The use of weight gain supplements remains highly controversial and even though there are dozens of varieties on the market, their effectiveness has not been demonstrated in long-term scientific studies.

There are numerous designer label supplements that are very expensive “cocktails” of a variety of herbs, vitamins, minerals, other nutrients along with coloring, preservatives and a host of other ingredients. In general, if the claim sounds too good to be true, it probably is. If the cost is extremely prohibitive, think twice before being persuaded.

There are more inexpensive, high calorie products on the market that may be comparable in energy and protein, and may help some individuals who workout intensively and are unable to consume enough calories to keep the weight on. The use of these products should be limited to *supplemental* use – in addition to a healthy diet of real food – and not a replacement for actual food.

Weight Gain for Individuals with Eating Disorders, Special Medical Conditions, and During Pregnancy

Individuals who need to gain weight who are diagnosed with eating disorders or have special medical conditions that contribute to their below-desirable body weight need to consult their medical professional and seek individualized advice based on their unique situation. People with anorexia nervosa, bulimia or other serious eating disorders require a multi-disciplinary approach to their weight issues. Persons who experience weight loss as a result of chemotherapy or other treatments have specialized nutritional considerations and dietary recommendations for maintaining nutritional balance and achieving a desirable weight.

Weight gain during pregnancy is a specialized area that is followed and monitored throughout a woman’s prenatal period and requires supervision by her health care provider.

A Few Tips For Successful Weight Gain

A few final tips to remember:

- Determine a realistic goal for gaining weight by calculating your desirable body weight.
- Aim for 1 pound per week.
- Eat every 2-3 hours: 5-6 “mini-meals” per day.
- Plan ahead and pack nutrient-dense snacks.

- Increase your portion size.
- Concentrate on the calories.
- Use healthy fats like olive, canola and flax seed oil in cooking.
- Make healthy high calorie smoothies with ingredients like fruit, peanut butter, low-fat yogurt or milk, or frozen yogurt.
- Keep a bowl of nuts or dried fruit on your counter or desk and grab a handful as you pass it.
- Exercise with weights to build muscle.
- Don't leave off the extras: use some low-fat cream cheese or margarine on your toast; add low-fat cheese and avocados to your sandwiches; eat whole grain bread with the meal and a healthy dessert after a meal.
- Enjoy the *process*, since it won't happen instantly!

As is the case with the millions of Americans striving to lose weight, gaining weight *takes time*. Set a goal and chart your progress over time. It will not happen overnight, but if you stick with it, you will be successful.

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