

# Healthy Weight Gain

## When is it OK to gain weight?

There are many reasons why people may need or want to gain weight.

- Older adults often lose weight without meaning to because they have less appetite. Or they may have trouble buying or preparing healthy food.
- If you have had a serious illness, you may have lost weight and muscle mass.
- If you are very thin, you may think you will look better if you gain some weight.
- Athletes may want to build their muscles and gain weight so they can do better in sports.

## What can I do to gain weight?

Generally, you can gain weight by:

- Eating foods with high calorie content
- Eating more food

Here are some ways to help you gain or regain weight:

- To start, eat about 500 calories more a day than you have been eating. Some people will need to add up to a 1,000 extra calories. Look at the top section of the Nutrition Facts label of packaged foods to see how many calories are in a serving.
- Try to eat larger-than-normal servings at each meal. If you have a poor appetite, it may work better to eat smaller, very high calorie meals and to eat more often. There are calorie and protein boosting powders that can be very helpful for people who are able to eat only very small amounts of food.
- Fat has more calories than any other food group: 45 calories in just 1 teaspoon. Adding healthy fats, such as plant oils (canola, olive, or peanut oil), peanut butter, and avocado, is an easy way to add more calories without having to eat a lot more food.

Avoid saturated and trans fats. Although all fats have the same amount of calories, saturated and trans fats can increase cholesterol and other harmful blood fats. Foods high in saturated fat include whole-milk dairy products, chicken skin, bacon, sausage, sour cream, butter, high-fat cuts of meat, and many processed snack foods. Many convenience, snack, and fast foods contain both saturated and trans fats.

- Even though you are eating a high-calorie diet, you should try to keep your diet healthy by including plenty of whole grains and fruits. Also include a lot of vegetables and lean protein foods such as skim milk products, skinless poultry, fish, egg whites, beans, and low-fat cuts of pork and beef.
- Fix meats and vegetables in canola or olive oil or wine sauces, or add bread crumb toppings.
- Add extra powdered milk and margarine to mashed potatoes.

- Add skim milk instead of water when you fix soup. Top with croutons and Parmesan cheese. Bean and minestrone soups have more calories than broth types of soups.
- Add dried or fresh fruits, nuts, and seeds to breakfast cereals, or choose the higher calorie cereals such as muesli and granola.
- When you drink juice, grape, cranberry, pineapple, or apple juices have more calories than other juices.
- When you have a salad, add avocado, garbanzo beans, raisins, and sunflower seeds. Adding chopped nuts and lean meats will add extra protein as well as calories. Use dressings made with heart-healthy oils, such as canola or olive oil.
- Add powdered milk to 1% milk to increase both calories and protein. Instant breakfast drinks and milk flavorings can also increase the calories in milk.
- Dietary supplements such as Boost and Ensure are good between-meal snacks. If you have an intestinal problem, Enlive (a clear liquid supplement) may be a good choice. Ask your healthcare provider about these products.
- Eat dessert after dinner. Look for desserts made with healthy oils or low-fat milk.
- Snacking is a big part of healthy weight gain. Try yogurt with crunchy cereal added, fruit wafers, graham crackers, crackers with cheese, mini sandwiches and burritos, milkshakes made with frozen yogurt or low-fat ice cream, dried fruits, trail mix, vegetables dipped in salad dressing, and nuts.

## **How can I gain muscle instead of fat?**

Exercise can help to increase your appetite. To gain lean muscle mass and not fat, you need to do strength training. To build muscle you can lift free weights, use weight machines, use resistance bands, use your own bodyweight (such as push-ups, pull-ups, or sit-ups), or use other equipment.

For each pound gained as muscle in a week, you will need to take in about 500 extra calories each day. Carbohydrate foods, such as grains, fruits, vegetables, milk, and yogurt, provide energy and help your muscles recover from workouts. It also helps to increase how much protein you eat. Some good snacks if you are trying to gain weight are dried fruits, nuts, cottage cheese, pasta with sauce, or a peanut butter sandwich. Protein supplements may not help you gain weight and may add too much protein to your diet. If you need more protein, the best way to get it is to eat more high-protein foods.

These tips for ways to gain weight are for adults. If you are concerned that a child or young teen is too thin or not eating enough, you should speak with your healthcare provider before increasing the calories in your child's diet beyond what your child usually feels satisfied eating. Many children are thin and then fill out naturally as they grow.

For more information, see

- ChooseMyPlate  
<http://www.choosemyplate.gov/>

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