

Underweight and Difficulty Gaining Weight

Maintaining a healthy body weight is important for good health, but every person's energy needs are different, depending on their activity levels. Ultimately, the "energy in" from food each day must be balanced with the "energy out" expended through exercise and activity.

For people with physical disabilities, energy needs are often related to ability. For example, people who use a wheelchair tend to have less energy needs than those who walk. People with spasticity type cerebral palsy tend to have less energy needs than those with athetosis.

Dietitian reviews are recommended for any person at risk of being either over – or underweight. Reviews will assist you to determine the most suitable foods to meet your needs.

Challenges Gaining and Maintaining Weight

Some children with disabilities have difficulty gaining weight and may be underweight for their height and age. This can continue into adulthood, with some people struggling to gain weight and maintain a healthy body weight their entire lives.

Low body weight can lead to:

- Growth failure in children
- Decreased muscle strength
- Reduced ability to cough
- Increased risk of infection
- Constipation
- Osteoporosis
- Pressure injury
- Irritability
- Depression

There are two general causes of low body weight: a lack of correct nutrition to gain and maintain weight; and more energy being expended than is being taken in.



Reasons for not getting the right amount of food include:

- Difficulties with eating and drinking
- Inability to express hunger or thirst
- Requiring assistance with eating and drinking
- Reflux, vomiting or aspiration (food and drink going into the lungs)
- Requiring food textures to be changed before eating or drinking
- Lack of appetite
- Taking a long time to eat and drink
- Constipation

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Reasons for excessive energy expenditure include:

- Increased muscle tone e.g. spasticity
- Involuntary movements e.g. athetosis

Healthy diet suggestions for putting on weight include:

- Eating smaller, frequent meals during the day – six small meals and snacks can be easier than three large meals
- Choosing full fat foods over low fat e.g. full cream milk or enriched milk instead of low-fat

- Adding extra energy to food by mixing in extra fats and oils, grated cheese or milk powder
- Including nutritious milk-based drinks such as smoothies and milkshakes into a daily diet
- Exercising regularly – exercise can boost appetite and promotes muscle health. Any regular activity, including gentle stretching, can help

Health Professional Support

Concerns about poor diet, low weight or weight loss should be discussed with a doctor or dietitian. Dietitians can assist in identifying an ideal weight range and how much food is needed to achieve a slow, steady weight gain.



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