

A photograph showing a person's feet standing on a white analog scale. The scale has a circular dial with a red needle pointing to approximately 140. The background is plain white.

# The Role of Weight Management in Immune Disorders

Understanding the common and unique weight-management challenges faced by individuals with immune disorders can help them to take control and maintain a healthy weight.

By Jill Weisenberger, MS, RD, CDE

**W**hen it comes to managing health, it's no surprise if weight control is not the first thing on the minds of individuals with immune disorders. Taking care of family, home, work, doctors' appointments, infusion schedules and other responsibilities can leave these individuals so sapped of energy that the couch and the TV are far more inviting than pushing a grocery cart or standing over a hot stove. And, instead of planning and preparing meals, they may be more apt to grab whatever is easiest.

But, that lack of energy, coupled with medications, poor food choices and lack of exercise, can leave them with some extra pounds, draining them of even more energy.

### **Lack of Energy: A Vicious Cycle**

Carrying extra weight increases stress on the spine and legs, which makes moving around more difficult — even for the healthiest of individuals. For those who already have decreased mobility because of neuropathy, multiple sclerosis

or other debilitating diseases, even a few extra pounds can feel like a ton, making normal daily activities more difficult.

“These problems can become a vicious, self-perpetuating cycle,” says John D. England, MD, FAAN, the Grace Benson professor and chair of the Department of Neurology, Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center in New Orleans. “Excessive weight further reduces activity, which then results in even more weight gain.”

“If someone is 50 pounds overweight, that is like continuously carrying around a 50-pound sack of flour all day,” says England. “Thus, the more weight that they can lose, the easier it will be for them to accommodate their disability and get around.” They can expect less of an energy drain as well.

### **Medications: An Added Challenge**

A lack of get-up-and-go may not be the only thing contributing to stubborn pounds. Many of the common medications used to treat immune disorders increase the likelihood of gaining weight. Antidepressants such as amitriptyline and nortriptyline, antiepileptics such as gabapentin, and steroids such as prednisone frequently cause weight gain unless dietary changes are made, says England.

Excess fat does more than just weigh people down. Body fat is not inert. Instead, fat tissue secretes a variety of hormones and growth factors into the bloodstream that can affect both immune function and inflammation. Overweight and obesity are strongly linked to type 2 diabetes, heart disease, sleep disorders, certain cancers and otherwise preventable complications and hospitalizations not directly related to immune disorders. Studies suggest that obese individuals have a 50 percent to 100 percent increased risk of death from all causes compared to individuals of a healthy weight. Most of the disproportionate risk is attributable to heart disease.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the medications hindering weight-loss efforts also increase blood cholesterol and blood glucose levels, pumping up the risks for heart disease and diabetes even more. For example, it’s not uncommon to see blood glucose numbers jump from a healthy level to the pre-diabetes or even diabetes range shortly after starting prednisone. These troublesome side effects are more reason for individuals to carefully watch their weight.

### **Nutrition: Universal Mistakes**

Achieving and maintaining a healthy weight is difficult whether or not an individual has an underlying health problem. Each year, there are more people who are un-

successful with their weight-loss attempts than there are successful dieters. Many things derail the best intentions, but there are a few seemingly universal mistakes. Here are four common slip-ups and their solutions.

**Too many liquid calories.** Americans get about 20 percent of calories from beverages.<sup>3</sup> Part of the problem is that these liquid calories don’t do much to satisfy hunger. Rarely do people compensate for the calories in drinks such as in sodas, juice, punch or fancy coffee drinks as they do for the calories they eat. But, one extra can of soda daily at about 150 calories piles on about 15 pounds at the end of a year. And, with super-sized cups and free refills, it’s not uncommon to drink 400 or more calories in one meal.

*Solution:* Think before your drink. Focus on calorie-free beverages like water, unsweetened tea and coffee. Limit beverages with added sugars like sodas, lemonade and punches and even those with natural sugars, such as 100

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percent fruit juice. Even with all their nutrients, juices still pack on the calories without taming hunger. Be careful about what is added to coffee and tea, too. It’s possible to morph a virtually calorie-free drink into a calorie monster. Some whipped cream and a couple pumps of syrup can quickly add up to 200 or more calories. Water can’t be beat for hydration and for quenching thirst. To zip up its taste, try adding a little extra flavor from squeezed lemon or lime or a sprig of mint.

**Different days mean different habits.** Working hard Monday through Friday deserves reward but not a weekend diet reprieve. It’s pretty easy to undo a week of calorie savings in a couple of days that are filled with large restaurant meals, pizzas, a few drinks with friends and more desserts than usual. Moreover, a lot of people get tripped up by thinking that they’re not eating much on the weekends because they may skip a meal or just nibble throughout the day. But less food doesn’t necessarily mean fewer calories. A typical dinner in a chain restaurant can cost upward of 1,000 calories, and that’s even without dessert.

*Solution:* Make sure that the occasional splurge is really only occasional, and practice consistency from day to day. Researchers involved with the National Weight Control Registry found that those who maintain their food habits day after day are the most likely to maintain their weight loss.<sup>4</sup> “Individuals with an immunodeficiency learn to become consistent with taking their medication and scheduling their infusions because they understand the negative consequences of not doing so,” says Matthew D. Hansen, DPT, of Auburn, Wash. “The same kind of faithfulness can be demonstrated toward exercise and healthy eating.”

Another part of the solution is choosing more healthful rewards. Getting through a difficult week of work and family obligations does deserve a treat, so individuals should be certain to schedule some enjoyable time just for themselves. It might be a few minutes of quiet time outside, a card game or movie with a family member, a good book or anything that brings them pleasure. And, while they should try to do this every day, they should make it a firm rule to take this time for themselves several times each week.

**Eating more than you realize.** Portion sizes at home and in restaurants are much larger than they used to be. For example, between 1977 and 1996, the average cheeseburger grew from 5.8 ounces to 7.3 ounces.<sup>5</sup> During the same time, the average daily intake jumped by 168 calories for men and 335 calories for women.<sup>6</sup> This swelling of portions and caloric intake coincided with a doubling of the obesity rate. By not paying close attention to the quantity of food they consume, individuals might be undoing their other efforts.

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Eating while distracted contributes to increased quantities as well. Watching TV with a bag of chips makes it hard to know just how much is being eaten. Snacking while cooking or cleaning is another way to lose track of calories.

*Solution:* It's time for individuals to examine their portions. They can start by cutting back just 10 percent of their meats, starches and desserts. To discourage second and third helpings making their way onto the dinner plate, serve the food



from the kitchen instead of the table. Also, they should make a house rule to eat from a dish only — no bags, boxes, cartons or fists. Before eating chips or cookies, a reasonable portion should be served on a plate and the opened package should be put away.

**Being way too strict.** Sometimes when people make the decision to lose weight, they're a little too gung-ho and very impatient. Setting unrealistic goals can lead to diet failure. Most people can follow a strict diet for a few days to even a few months, but few people can commit to such a plan long-term. There are food cravings, feelings of punishment or deprivation, and sometimes even social isolation if the plan doesn't permit them to eat out or enjoy food with others. That's when it falls apart, and strict dieting gives way to old habits or binge eating.

*Solution:* Be patient. The speed at which an individual loses weight is far less important than actually losing the weight and keeping it off. In fact, experts at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) recommend a weight loss of 10 percent in about six months, followed by a period of weight maintenance, before additional weight loss is attempted.<sup>1</sup>

Instead of following a particular weight loss plan or giving up favorite foods, individuals should identify small changes they know they can live with. If desserts are the biggest weakness, they shouldn't be sworn off. Instead, practical, reasonable ways to limit sweets should be examined. For example, just two or three things can be eliminated to start, with more added as is comfortable. Also, vague goals like eating better, adding more fruit, eating less fried food and getting exercise should be avoided. Instead, it's better to start with broad ideas and make them more actionable and specific:

- “Eating better” might become eating three meals each day and having snacks only when hungry.
- “Adding more fruit” becomes more specific and practical when saying that at least two pieces of fruit each day will be added. Or, individuals might decide to not eat dessert until at least two pieces of fruit have been eaten.
- “Eating less fried food” could mean a goal of eating fried foods no more than once weekly or three times monthly.
- “Getting exercise” is more likely to yield lasting results by starting with a goal of walking five minutes daily or doing water aerobics twice weekly.

Individuals need to take a close look at their diet and other health habits. What would they like to change? How can they do that? Goals should be specific, reasonable and something that can be quantified. For instance, each of the above goals is specific and measurable. Whether or not they are reasonable depends upon the person making them. Individuals will know if they ate two pieces of fruit each day last week or if they met their goal only five times. If goals aren't specific, reasonable and measurable, they need to be refined until they are.

### Exercise: The Other Component

According to the Diabetes Prevention Program (DPP), a study sponsored by the NIH, individuals should strive for 150 minutes of exercise each week. They should start small and build up to what is a reasonable level of exercise for them. Hansen suggests individuals consult with their doctor before beginning an exercise program. And, he recommends training with a physical therapist or a qualified certified athletic trainer who is familiar with their specific diagnosis. Chair exercises or walking may be good places to start. If individuals have energy levels that are really low, or secondary health complications, they should be sure to walk with a friend and use any necessary adaptive equipment such as a walker or crutch, he warns.

### The Perfect Weight: Be Realistic

Being model-slim or reaching someone else's idea of the perfect weight does not have to be the goal. Even a small weight loss can lower risk of further disease, help fight infections and improve mobility. For example, according to the DPP, a modest loss of about 7 percent of total body weight can significantly lower the chances of developing type 2 diabetes.<sup>2</sup> If an individual weighs 170 pounds, that's about a 12-pound loss. For someone weighing about 220 pounds, it's about 15 pounds.

### Taking Personal Control

Treating the whole body and not just the primary disease is critical, says Neil L. Kao, MD, allergist and immunologist in Greenville and Spartanburg, S.C. Kao says he asks his patients what their weight is, whether they are eating right and whether they are getting some exercise. “These are fundamental things that will help you stay healthier for longer, help you fight one infection after another.” But it's no easy task to control weight, he acknowledges. Some medical conditions can leave people feeling exhausted even when they haven't left the house. “Metabolically they might be running a marathon,” so it's no wonder they're not up for a daily walk.

But, managing weight is beneficial even beyond physical health. Taking control of any problem that seems out of control is empowering, and weight issues are no exception. Additionally, a better mood, improved eating habits and a little weight loss can boost energy levels, leading to a positive cycle of better health habits and even more energy.

For additional help, contact a registered dietitian. A geographical listing of dietitians can be found at [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org). ■

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