

# Weight-Loss Strategies for the Mobility Impaired

Even individuals who find it difficult to move due to fatigue and/or disability can achieve weight-loss success by following some simple steps.

By Jill Weisenberger, MS, RD, CDE

losing weight is tough for anyone, but it seems like a Herculean task for individuals who struggle to move around. Jogging around the block or joining a dance class at the gym to blast through extra calories is out of the question. For some, even everyday household chores are difficult. Preparing a healthful meal, for example, without the strength to cut through vegetables or the stamina to stand over a hot stove are clear hurdles to weight loss.



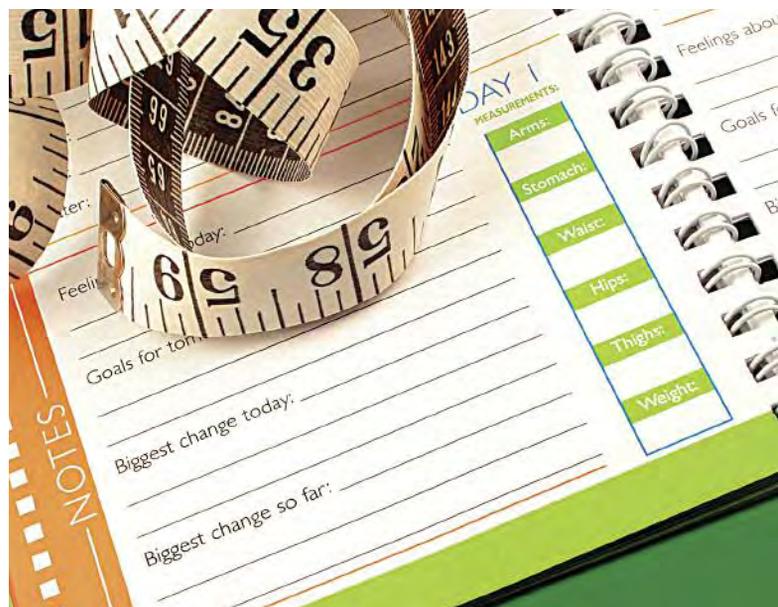
Such hurdles, however, are not insurmountable. Lots of planning and some simple strategies can make the elusive weight loss a reality. Here are some steps to success.

### List Personal Reasons to Lose Weight

Because he was “running out of wardrobe” and tired of feeling short-winded, Walter Luebke, 77, of Elkhart, Ind., decided to lose weight. And, 63-year-old Nancy Wilcosky of Latrobe, Pa., changed her diet in support of her daughter who recently had weight-loss surgery. Luebke walks with a cane, and Wilcosky shuffles between walker and wheelchair because of polio syndrome. Both knew their physical limitations could hold them back, but with clear, strong motives and determination, they have both been successful. Luebke lost 25 pounds and Wilcosky is 52 pounds lighter and still dropping.

Each person’s motives to shed pounds are different. Chances for success increase dramatically when those motives are clearly defined and put in writing. Motivation waxes and wanes, so having a list to refer back to — a list to remind the individual why he or she is working so hard — helps reignite a dwindling fire.

Common reasons to lose weight are to look better, feel better, have less physical pain or discomfort, improve immune function, decrease chronic disease risk, improve



average weight loss of nearly 1,700 participants in their weight-loss program was about 13 pounds in six months. Individuals who kept daily food records lost twice as much weight as those who kept no records.<sup>1</sup>

“I never realized how much I was eating,” says 68-year-old Arlene Serkin of Bethpage, N.Y. On the advice of a registered dietitian, Serkin records everything she eats and drinks, the time she consumes them, what her mood is and how hungry she feels according to a 10-point scale. Keeping a food record keeps her accountable and honest with herself, she explains.

Serkin, who jests that she’s put together with glue because of several health issues, including osteoarthritis and vascular disease, allowed herself to substitute physical activity with food when her ailments became severe enough that her mobility was hugely limited. Now with her food record, medically supervised physical activity, stronger determination and a registered dietitian’s help, Serkin has lost 23 pounds and is still slimming down.

Wilcosky finds accountability in her daughter and a support group they attend together. Other dieters swap food records with a buddy once weekly or simply discuss successes and problems with a friend. The type of accountability is less important than just sticking with it.

### Count Calories

The only way to lose weight is to burn more calories than you eat. Unfortunately, individuals with limited mobility just don’t run through calories like they would if

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chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease, lessen heartburn, improve mobility and better enjoy social activities and family gatherings. Whatever they are, writing them down both adds a level of importance and serves as a reminder.

### Be Accountable

Food records work. A large study from Kaiser Permanente’s Center for Health Research found that the



they were physically active. Thus, every calorie counts. Figure that cutting 500 calories each day will net approximately one pound lost each week. Cutting 250 calories leads to about one-half pound lost weekly. Food labels, calorie-counting books like *The CalorieKing Calorie, Fat & Carbohydrate Counter* and websites such as [MyPyramid.gov](http://MyPyramid.gov) provide most of the information needed. [MyPyramid.gov](http://MyPyramid.gov) also can help you determine your appropriate calorie level. The key will be estimating portions correctly. See Avoid Portion Distortion below.

### Balance the Plate

Toss out all restrictive diet plans. It's easy to fall for the newest, fastest, coolest weight-loss trend with lists of rules and taboo foods, but weight lost this way creeps back — often with interest — and doesn't provide optimal nutrition. Each day, Luebke set out to eat a variety of foods from each food group. He counted his grains, milk, vegetables and servings from each of the other groups. No fads, just balanced eating with smaller portions.

A healthful way to balance your diet is to make two-thirds or more of your food vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans and only one-third or less animal protein. Plan at least three food groups per meal making sure at least one is high in fiber and one is rich in protein. Be especially liberal with non-starchy vegetables like broccoli, green beans, tomatoes, carrots and cauliflower since they are packed with nutrients, very filling and low in calories. Bulking up the plate and snacks with vegetables is a sure way to tame hunger. Learn more about feeling full on

fewer calories and find tasty recipes at the American Institute for Cancer Research website at [www.aicr.org](http://www.aicr.org) and in the book, *The Volumetrics Eating Plan* by Barbara Rolls, PhD (HarperCollins, 2005).

### Avoid Portion Distortion

There's no doubt about it: Typical restaurant and home portions are simply too big to support a healthy weight. Research shows that even savvy dieters eat more when large servings and lots of variety are in front of them. What's more, most people significantly underestimate the amount they consume. Serkin's nutritionist, New York-based registered dietitian Susan Weiner, urges her clients to use a kitchen scale and measuring cups to get a handle on appropriate portion sizes. "If you can't burn a lot of calories through movement," Weiner says, "you must monitor your portions."

We eat with our eyes — not just our stomachs. The brain is tricked into being more satisfied with smaller portions if the food is served on smaller plates, according to research from Cornell University.<sup>2</sup> Trade in dinner plates and large bowls for luncheon plates and cup-sized bowls. Wilcosky has found success with this method. "I'm satisfying my eye-hunger," she says. Try this trick with flatware and serving utensils too. Eating ice cream with a baby spoon, for example, gives you more tastes from a single scoop.

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Avoid second and third helpings by keeping serving bowls off the table. Fill your plate from the kitchen counter, but eat at the table. Or, put extra food away before sitting down to eat. Another strategy, suggests Wilcosky, is to prepare only what you and your family will eat at one meal.

### Rethink That Drink

We sip about 20 percent of our calories each day,<sup>3</sup> but it's easy to ignore those liquid calories. Sodas, juices, sweet tea

and fancy coffee drinks don't fill us up the way food does. Replacing some or all of those caloric beverages with water and other zero-calorie drinks will trim calories and your waistline. Be careful to keep drinking throughout the day, however. Even slight dehydration can sap your energy, making you less inclined to prepare a healthful meal.

### Make Smart Substitutions

"Frying is out of the vocabulary," says Wilcosky, who now favors the oven over the fry pan. Baking is more healthful and saves a lot of calories. Reduced-fat cheese in place of the regular variety also saves calories, and less-saturated fat is a bonus. For dessert, Wilcosky satisfies her sweet tooth with frozen grapes or pureed and frozen melon. It tastes like sherbet, she says. For sensible swaps in recipes, pick up a low-fat cookbook at your library.

### Treat Yourself

Swearing off favorite foods is a recipe for diet failure because the forbidden item becomes even more tempting. It's best instead to plan treats in small quantities. Buy a single bakery cookie instead of a box of cookies, for example. The key: small portions and only now and then.

### Plan Ahead

Lifestyle changes rarely happen without a good plan and a backup plan. It's important for dieters to recognize what is holding them back and to make a plan to overcome it. If the goal is to eat more vegetables, for example, the individual must plan how he or she will add vegetables. What's required? For some, it will mean learning to cook vegetables, preparing a salad that can last three or four days, purchasing vegetables from the grocery, exploring frozen options or visiting a restaurant that offers several vegetable choices. Serkin recognized that her diet lacked vegetables, but used the excuse that they were too difficult for her to cut. Now she plans ahead and has her supermarket pre-cut vegetables for her. They prepare and repackage whatever she wants whether it's one zucchini or several. And, they do it for no additional charge. Success came with a plan and taking action.

Maryland-based registered dietitian and certified diabetes educator Jamie Futterman suggests that dieters with extreme fatigue look for patterns in their day. The individual should take advantage of those times of the day when he or she feels the most energetic, she suggests. Those times are the opportunities to prepare a meal or engage in physical activity as able and permitted.

For more planning-ahead ideas and suggestions for adapting your kitchen, look to *The Essential Arthritis Cookbook: Kitchen Basics for People with Arthritis, Fibromyalgia and Other Chronic Pain and Fatigue* (Appletree Press).

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### Modify Exercise

There are plenty of exercise options for people with limited mobility; however, such individuals must use extra caution and exercise only under medical supervision. Several of Futterman's clients found success in pool walking, and Weiner recommends seated exercises with weights or resistance bands if medically safe. Collage Video ([www.collagevideo.com](http://www.collagevideo.com)) offers a variety of seated and specialty exercise DVDs, including chair dancing.

### Putting It All Together

Examples of meaningful diet and exercise lifestyle changes shared by Wilcosky, Luebke and Serkin are proof that taking simple steps can lead to weight-loss success. All it takes is putting all of these steps together to get optimal weight-loss results.

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