

Gain Weight

the *Right Way*



By Jill Weisenberger, MS, RD, CDE

Individuals who are underweight can experience as many health risks as overweight individuals. Therefore, good nutrition habits that can increase weight to a healthful level are essential.

While most people are focused on overweight and obesity and their health risks, being at the other end of the scale also is associated with medical problems. Being underweight can cause bone loss and osteoporosis, delayed wound healing, poor growth in children and infertility in women. Many underweight individuals celebrate that they are not battling the bulge and believe that their low weight gives them license to eat anything they want. This is a bad tactic for anyone to take, but especially for those with chronic diseases. Bodies rely on the proper mix of nutrients to feed the immune system, support growth, build muscle and other tissues and maintain function of every organ and body system.

What can good nutrition achieve? It can help individuals fend off an infection before it has a chance to take hold, as well as to recover more quickly. Good nutrition can help mood, sleep, mental focus and energy level. For individuals with gastrointestinal problems that cause malabsorption and nutrient losses, it's even more important to make every bite count. The bottom line is that no matter what an individual's weight, eating healthfully matters. Here are some simple strategies to boost calories and nutrition for healthful weight gain. Aim for 500 to 1,000 additional calories daily. If this goal is out of reach, consuming 200 or 300 extra calories daily will help with weight gain, although at a slower pace.

Sip on It

It's a common misconception that the primary drink needs to be plain water. As healthful as water is, for someone needing to gain weight, other beverages are better choices. Replace several glasses of water with 100 percent fruit juice and nonfat or 1 percent lowfat milk. Each offers fluids for hydration and nutrients for overall health. By trading in an 8-ounce glass of water for an equal amount of grape juice, for example, an additional 150 calories will be consumed. Variety will provide better nutrition and keep taste buds happy. Here are some swaps to sip on and the extra calories provided in 8 fluid ounces.

- Orange juice: 110
- Pineapple juice: 130
- Cranberry juice: 115
- Peach nectar: 130
- Pomegranate juice: 130
- Nonfat milk: 80
- 1 percent lowfat milk: 100
- 1 percent lowfat chocolate milk: 160

Eat Bigger Portions

Increasing your portions of rice, chicken and broccoli by just a little or even doubling them can increase calorie intake without having to prepare additional food or eat an extra snack. Milk or juice can be poured into a taller glass, cereal can be eaten from a larger bowl, and bigger bananas, potatoes and other fruits and vegetables can be chosen. Even making sandwiches on thicker or denser bread or on bigger rolls counts.

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Add Healthful Fats

Don't fear fat. Fat sometimes gets a bad rap, but it is undeserved, especially for someone trying to gain weight. Ounce for ounce, fat provides more than double the calories of protein or carbohydrates, making it ideal to slip a lot of calories into a relatively small portion of food. The key is to choose foods rich in the healthful fats and light on the saturated and trans fats. High intakes of trans fatty acids and most saturated fatty acids are linked to increased levels of LDL (bad) cholesterol and reduced insulin sensitivity. Additionally, trans fats lower HDL (good) cholesterol. Trans fats can be recognized on food labels by looking for the words "partially hydrogenated oils" in the ingredients list. These processed foods should be left on the supermarket shelves, and another brand without trans fats — or, better yet, whole, unprocessed foods — should be selected. Foods rich in saturated fats are easy to recognize by their firmness at room temperature. When bacon grease has cooled, it solidifies. Even after sitting on the counter for a few hours, butter is still firm. These are hints that bacon and butter contain a lot of saturated fat. Dairy fat and the tropical oils (coconut, palm and palm kernel) also are largely saturated. Cheese is nutrient-packed, but because of the saturated fat, small amounts should be used or reduced-fat varieties should be purchased.

Some ways to add healthful fats to a diet include:

- Slipping avocado onto sandwiches; dicing it into salads, including chicken and tuna salads; and mashing it for a spread on bread and a dip for chips and raw veggies.
- Dipping bread into seasoned olive oil.
- Stirring pesto sauce into soups and pasta dishes.
- Using a heavy hand when cooking with good-for-you oils like olive and canola oils.
- Drizzling a little extra oil onto salads.
- Adding olives to salads, chicken and fish dishes, or simply enjoying them as a snack.
- Snacking on all types of nuts — sprinkling them into oatmeal, dry cereals, fruit salads and sautéed vegetables; combining them with dried fruit and dry cereals for a one-of-a-kind trail mix; and adding peanuts to chicken dishes.
 - Using peanut butter and other nut butters liberally, and thinking beyond crackers, breads and English muffins: filling celery sticks with peanut butter or almond butter; mixing either of them into fruit smoothies; adding peanut butter to noodles with chile peppers and cilantro for an Asian flair; whipping up a peanut dipping sauce for chicken, beef or shrimp; and sipping on peanut soup.

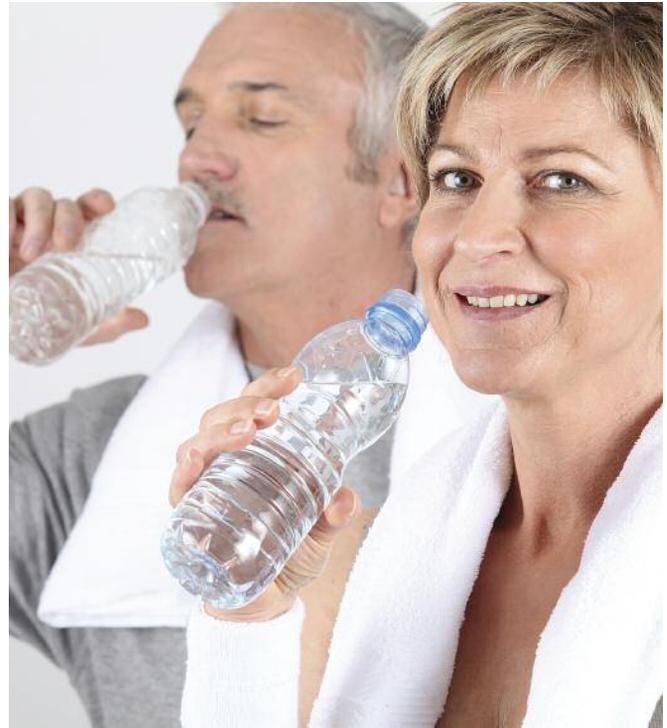
Turn Snacks Into Mini Meals

Instead of snacking on just an apple, an apple can be diced into yogurt and topped with granola. The goal is to aim for three food groups for each snack, such as whole wheat pita bread, hummus and carrot sticks, or whole grain crackers, reduced-fat cheese and fruit. A peanut butter and banana sandwich on whole grain bread is both super easy and super fast.

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Add Higher Calorie Foods

Lower-calorie nutrient-dense foods like spinach, plums and vegetable soup shouldn't be eliminated completely, because an array of nutrients are provided by a varied diet.



But often opting for the higher-calorie nutrient-dense choices is better. For example, corn has more calories than spinach, a banana has more calories than a plum, and black bean soup packs more calories than vegetable soup.

These calorie-rich foods offer lots of nutrition. Their approximate calories per serving sizes are listed:

- Nuts and nut butters: 190 calories per 2 tablespoons
- Avocado: 160 calories per 1/2 avocado
- Corn: 130 calories per cup
- Peas: 80 calories per cup
- Black beans, kidney beans and other dried beans: 200 calories per cup
- Bran flakes: 125 calories per cup
- Granola: 425 calories per cup
- Dried fruit: 80 to 140 calories per 1/4 cup

Corn, peas and beans are tasty additions to salads. Dried cherries, cranberries and raisins are delicious in green salads, as well as chicken salad. Baked or roasted chicken pairs well with dried apricots and prunes. For breakfast, bran flakes should be opted for over corn flakes, or two cereals could be mixed together.

Sneak It In

Sometimes the best additions are hidden — those ingredients that add a nutritional punch without drastically

changing the taste or texture of the original food. Examples of this are powdered milk added to fluid milk and mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese and other casseroles. Or, one cup of powdered milk added to each quart of fluid milk and one tablespoon of powdered milk added to one cup of a casserole or other food. Additionally, pureed white beans can be whisked into soups or stews, and ground flax seed can be mixed into muffin mix and oatmeal.

Do It Any Way

Breakfast foods don't have to be limited to the morning meal. Eggs, pancakes and waffles can be eaten any time of day. Likewise, meatloaf and mashed potatoes can be eaten for breakfast. Food should be eaten at any time, even if it's not mealtime. And, there's no need to conform to the typical pattern of a large dinner and small breakfast.

Drink Water at the End of a Meal

Water before or during a meal might take up precious stomach space that could otherwise be filled with nutrient-packed, calorie-rich foods.

Perk Up a Poor Appetite

Staying active, like taking a walk before mealtime and lifting weights to maintain muscle mass, can give a person a healthy appetite. Those who are not physically able to do these things should talk to a doctor about a referral to a physical therapist.

Sometimes medications take away an appetite. Physicians might be able to switch medications, prescribe a lower dose or recommend it be taken several hours from mealtime. However, any changes should first be discussed with a member of the healthcare team.

Stay Balanced

Many people feel that to gain weight healthfully, they need to eat extra protein. While some illnesses and injuries may increase an individual's protein needs, most people do not need to focus on consuming extra protein-rich foods. Eating a balanced diet with additional calories is sufficient.

Consider Supplements

Regular foods are usually better than supplement beverages. In some circumstances, however, beverages like Boost and Ensure have a place. Carnation Instant Breakfast or other instant breakfast powder also may be

helpful. Before selecting any of these, individuals should check with their physician or a registered dietitian. Additionally, protein powders should be avoided unless a member of the healthcare team has recommended a specific brand or reviewed the ingredients label carefully. Many of these products are not what they seem. A trained professional should evaluate any supplement before it is taken.

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Maintain Health Habits

Usual health habits should be maintained while trying to gain weight, including getting adequate sleep, exercising as able, not smoking, and taking time for relaxation and recreation. Those who require additional or more specific guidance than these general recommendations should make an appointment with a registered dietitian. One can be found in most areas at www.eatright.org. ■

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