



# Controlling Weight with an Immune Disorder

Lifestyle changes that include proper food choices, exercise and other healthy habits can help individuals gain or lose weight healthfully as needed.

By Emily Cooper, RDN

**WEIGHT CAN OFTEN** be a challenge for those with an immune disorder. For those carrying around excess weight, losing extra pounds can help improve health outcomes, lower the risk for certain diseases and increase energy levels. And, while getting rid of the stubborn weight can be more of a difficult task for those with immune and/or autoimmune diseases than the average dieter, it can ease symptoms and reduce inflammation in the body. “Losing just 5 percent to 7 percent of weight may reduce joint pain in patients with rheumatoid arthritis by reducing overall inflammation,” says Lisa Andrews, MEd,

RD, LD, owner of Sound Bites Nutrition, LLC, in Cincinnati, Ohio.

On the other side of the coin, certain immune disorders can make it difficult to gain or maintain weight, or they can cause unintentional weight loss. Being underweight can endanger health and keep the body from getting the nutrients it needs to look and feel its best. Some of the problems of being underweight include bone loss, decreased immune function and iron deficiency, among others.

Following are some tips for achieving a healthy weight loss or gain.

## Healthy Weight Loss

Slow and steady reigns true when it comes to weight loss. Aiming for a 1-pound to 2-pound weight loss each week is a good place to start, and it reduces chances of regaining the weight. Cutting back on 250 to 500 calories each day by making good food choices, exercising or both can help individuals reach weight-loss goals in a more sustainable way. These methods can help to shed pounds:

*Eat plant-powered foods.* Putting plant-based foods like fruits, vegetables, beans and whole grains at the forefront of a diet can aid in weight management and immune support. Since immune disorders can impact the body's immune system and the ability to fight off infections, including foods that support immunity such as plant-powered foods is especially important and beneficial to health and weight maintenance. Research has shown that those who follow a vegetarian diet have a significant benefit on weight reduction compared to nonvegetarian diets.<sup>1</sup> This doesn't mean everyone should adopt a vegetarian diet, but it helps to show that plant-powered diets can play an important role in weight maintenance.

One of the key benefits of plant-based foods when it comes to weight maintenance is fiber. A higher intake of fiber has been associated with lower body weights, as well as a reduced risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes.<sup>2</sup> Naturally occurring dietary fiber can be found only in plant-derived foods. Therefore, increasing the amounts of these foods in the diet is one of the easiest ways to increase fiber intake. Snacking on cut-up vegetables and fresh fruits and including at least one serving of either at each meal or snack are easy ways to put fiber at the forefront of a diet.

Unfortunately, certain immune disorders can make choosing the right fiber-rich foods a little more involved. This includes avoiding gluten-containing grains with celiac disease, limiting raw or undercooked vegetables, and avoiding nuts and seeds or specific foods that exacerbate symptoms, especially with Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis. Yet, while consuming lots of fiber-rich foods in the diet may not be suitable with all immune disorders, including as many as tolerable can help support weight maintenance and immunity.

*Hydrate.* Hydrating is not only important for daily bodily functions like waste removal, joint lubrication and nutrient absorption, it can also help when it comes to weight loss and maintenance. In those actively working toward weight loss, research has shown increased water consumption can help

improve weight-loss efforts.<sup>3</sup> Drinking more water can help decrease the amount of calories consumed, especially prior to eating a meal. A 2010 study in the journal *Obesity* found that those who drank about two cups of water prior to each meal lost an average of 44 percent more weight than those who did not drink water before meals.<sup>4</sup>

While individual water needs can vary based on age, sex, exercise level and environment, The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine recommends an average of about 12 cups to 16 cups of fluid for healthy adults each day.

Individuals who struggle to consume enough water can try some of these tips:

- Drink a large glass of water first thing in the morning.
- Flavor water with frozen fruit, fresh herbs or unsweetened seltzer waters.
- Sip on herbal teas for an afternoon pick-me-up or after dinner.
- Keep a water bottle within arm's reach during the day as a gentle reminder to stay hydrated.
- Snack on fruits and vegetables with a high water content such as celery, bell peppers, watermelon, berries, melon and cucumbers.

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*Lower the impact.* Staying active with both daily movement and formal exercise is another important aspect of weight maintenance. This can sometimes be more difficult when faced with joint pain and mobility limitations or the threat of exacerbating symptoms that can come with certain immune disorders. But, opting for more gentle or low-impact exercise can be one way to make staying active more approachable and beneficial.

While staying physically active can be daunting, especially when pain, fatigue and stiffness are a part of living with an immune disorder, it has been shown to actually help improve symptoms overall. In fact, the incidences of multiple immune disorders such as rheumatoid arthritis (RA), multiple sclerosis (MS) and irritable bowel disease have been found to be lower in those who are engaged in physical activity.

Regular physical activity can also help to increase joint mobility for those with RA, improve mood and mobility in those with MS and help lower the risk of cardiovascular disease that can accompany many immune disorders.<sup>5</sup>

Low-impact exercise, including yoga, tai chi and walking, can be suitable options for many as a way to stay active, as well as to help alleviate symptoms. Individuals should find an activity they look forward to doing each day and that helps them feel their best. The key is for people to listen to their bodies and do what they have energy for. It is best to work with a healthcare provider to determine the best type, amount and frequency of low-impact exercise to include in weight-maintenance efforts.

*Stress less.* Eating right and staying active may be the first things that come to mind for weight maintenance, but one strategy that often slips under the radar is reducing stress. Not the short-term stress people may feel when giving a speech or running late for work. It's the day-in and day-out stress (chronic stress) that can wreak the most havoc. Stress has been shown to have a connection to the increased risk of developing or exacerbating symptoms of immune disorders,<sup>6</sup> and it can also interfere with weight-loss efforts.

Chronic stress can contribute to higher levels of the hormone cortisol in the body, which can also increase appetite. This can help to explain why many individuals “stress eat” or eat as a way to deal with stress. Stress is not a good feeling, and it can increase the desire for higher-calorie, heavy comfort foods like macaroni and cheese, ice cream or chocolate chip cookies.

Using stress-relieving or stress-management techniques can help control eating habits and how stress affects overall health. Some common practices include meditation, yoga, exercise, journaling and social support. Finding the method that works best is different for everyone, and it can take some trial and error before landing on the one or combination of many that works best for keeping stress under control.

*Journal.* Self-monitoring is an important aspect of weight loss, which can be accomplished by journaling or keeping a food diary. Those who track what they are eating tend to lose more weight than those who do not track or self-monitor. Being honest about what is consumed by writing it down can help to show that a small bite here, a couple handfuls there or an extra teaspoon or two truly add up.

Whether someone is more of a pen-and-paper journaler or a tech-savvy type, either method can be helpful for sticking



to weight-loss goals. It comes down to being honest about everything that is consumed, both food and drink, during the day that makes the biggest difference between an effective and ineffective journaling experience.

*Avoid triggers.* Eating a well-balanced diet that includes an array of fresh fruits, vegetables, lean proteins and whole grains is beneficial for any weight-maintenance program. But, certain considerations should be included for immune disorders that often come with limitations or challenges when including some or many of these foods.

For those with celiac disease, avoiding gluten-containing whole grains is paramount, but they can be swapped for gluten-free options like quinoa, popcorn, brown rice, buckwheat and oats. For those with Crohn's or ulcerative colitis, avoiding foods that tend to trigger flares should be avoided, and finding alternative choices to regularly include in the diet can help to support weight-loss efforts while controlling symptoms. Keeping track of when symptoms occur and what foods were eaten can also help rule out what foods to include or avoid, and help prevent symptoms from getting worse or continuing in the future.

## Healthy Weight Gain

Preventing too much weight loss with immune disorders is just as important and impactful to overall health as losing excess weight. For those struggling to improve their daily diets, here are some ways to help support healthy weight gain:

*Focus on fats.* Per gram, fats have more calories than both carbohydrates and proteins combined, making them a concentrated source of energy for the body. For people who may not be able to tolerate or stomach a higher volume of

food or simply want an easy way to increase calories, opting for more sources of healthy fats in the diet can be effective.

Not all fats are created equal though. Choosing unsaturated and omega-3-rich fats helps to support immune function, heart health and general well-being, in addition to a hefty dose of calories. These types of fats include olives and olive oil, fatty fish like salmon and mackerel, nuts and seeds, avocados and nut butters.

Some ways to incorporate more fats in the diet are:

- Drizzling salads or cooked vegetables with olive oil;
- Snacking on apple slices or celery sticks with peanut butter;
- Opting for fatty fish like salmon at dinner meals;
- Adding avocado slices to salads, sandwiches or omelettes; and
- Blending in avocado or peanut butter into a morning smoothie.

*Concentrated calories.* Methods for gaining weight are almost the complete opposite of trying to lose it. While proper nutrition is still a focus, opting for more calorie-dense options instead of the lighter choices of many dieters can help keep the weight on.

When it comes to vegetables, including more starch-heavy options like potatoes, corn and peas, especially when paired with a serving of healthy fats like a drizzle of olive oil or cubed avocado, can boost calories in a much smaller portion

than the same amount of nonstarchy vegetables like spinach, peppers or broccoli. Fruits like bananas and mangos or dried fruits like dates, apricots and figs are all more calorie-heavy than melons, berries or citrus fruits.

Blending multiple higher-calorie foods into a morning smoothie is an easy way to pack a lot of nutrition and support healthy weight gain. This can be a convenient option during busy mornings, when traveling or if someone doesn't have a big appetite for a full meal. Some smoothie boosting mix-ins include:

- Banana with peanut butter or oats
- Mango and Greek yogurt
- Avocado and cocoa powder
- Dates and walnuts

*Beverage choices.* While downing a glass of water before a meal may help when it comes to losing weight, beverage choices at mealtime can make gaining weight more difficult. Consuming beverages toward the end of the meal or even spaced out from meals can make consuming more calories easier. Carbonated beverages such as seltzer or mineral waters can also interfere with weight-gain efforts since they can increase the feeling of fullness or cause bloating. These types of beverages should be avoided during mealtimes.

## Lifestyle Change is the Key

Maintaining a healthy weight is key to keeping the immune system functioning at its best. While those with an immune system disorder may struggle with either losing or gaining weight, the key is to make gradual lifestyle changes that include healthy eating, regular physical activity and other healthy habits that become lifelong behaviors. ■

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