

I'm worried about my weight

I don't have enough energy

I don't like the way I look

I struggle to find time for exercise



**Most of us know** that we need to aim for a healthy, balanced diet and regular exercise to maintain our physical health. These same goals are also important when maintaining our mental health and well-being. Many people struggle with balanced eating, being active and feeling good about their bodies—and the struggles can start young. In a BC study of students in Grades 7 to 12, only 10% of young women said that they were very satisfied with their body image.<sup>1</sup>

## Dieting can have a powerful effect on your health

When you diet, a number of changes can impact your physical and mental health. Drastic diets can be hard on the body and increase the risks of medical complications. You might notice that dieting also starts to affect your emotions. You might feel sad or irritable or experience mood swings. You might notice that it's harder to concentrate and that your thinking can become distorted. For example, eating one cookie may lead you to believe you are a complete failure. When you diet, your body senses a food shortage. As a result, you might feel deprived, preoccupied with food and more sensitive to food around you. Your energy levels might decrease and you may begin to feel tired more often. These changes make it easy to understand why people find diets hard to maintain.

## Do diets work?

Diets, especially drastic diets, are usually not a good strategy for people who want to change their body shape. Many people aren't very successful at staying on a diet. Most people who lose weight from dieting only lose small amounts of weight and eventually gain it back. In fact, many people gain back more weight than they lost during the diet. Dieting can also have surprising long-term effects. Some studies have found that people who diet tend to gain more weight over time than people who don't diet. Some diets also suggest that you leave out important food groups, which can affect your physical and mental health over time.

**Read on for information and practical tips that can help you make good choices for you and your family**



# why do so many people diet?

Many people feel unhappy with the way they look and want to be thinner—even if they are of normal weight. We are constantly shown thin body images on television, movies and in magazines. These images are unrealistic for most people to obtain. Your genetic background predisposes you to different shapes and sizes. Also, photographs are often touched up and the people in them often have access to extensive body-shaping exercise regimens or plastic surgeries.

## Examples of unhealthy coping strategies that are considered disordered eating can include:

- Not eating enough to maintain a healthy body weight
- Deliberate vomiting
- Excessive exercise to burn off calories
- Taking laxatives
- Trouble controlling binge eating
- Smoking or vaping to reduce appetite and sense of hunger
- Using diet pills or illegal drugs to reduce appetite

Some of these options may seem like they help with weight loss or weight control. Unfortunately, none of these strategies work when it comes to maintaining balanced food intake or a healthy body weight. All of these strategies can also be extremely dangerous to your health. Many of these behaviours can be signs that someone is struggling with an eating disorder. There is help for people when their eating patterns or concern about weight and shape begin to compromise their health

## Feeling bad about your body can lead to disordered eating

With all the emphasis on being thin, it's not surprising that some people obsess about their weight and feel extremely upset about their body shape. Kids and adults who feel this kind of pressure to be thin are at an increased risk for turning to unhealthy coping strategies and developing an eating disorder.

## Why do media images make you feel bad?

It's natural to feel unhappy with your body when you compare yourself to unrealistic images. You're more likely to feel this way if you already feel down or dissatisfied with how you look, or when you don't feel supported by the people in your life. It can be tempting to believe that you would be happier if you lost weight. Media images often show that being thin makes you happy, successful and in control of your life. Sadly, there also continues to be widespread discrimination and stigma directed towards those who are overweight or obese. In reality, both happy and unhappy people come in all shapes and sizes.

## If you or someone you care about experiences disordered eating:

- Visit [www.keltyeatingdisorders.ca](http://www.keltyeatingdisorders.ca) or call 1-800-665-1822 for Kelty Eating Disorders. You can learn more about eating disorders and find resources across BC.
- Visit [www.jessieslegacy.com](http://www.jessieslegacy.com) or call 604-988-5281 ext. 241 for Jessie's Legacy Eating Disorders Prevention and Awareness. You can learn more about preventing disordered eating and find support.
- Visit [www.nedic.ca](http://www.nedic.ca) for the National Eating Disorder Information Centre. You can find information and resources.

# exercise can improve your mental health!

Exercise can help your physical health by increasing fitness, increasing energy and building strength. Exercise can also have a positive impact on your mental health. People who exercise often report less anxiety. It may help improve feelings of mild depression and help counter stress.

To get this positive impact on your mood, you don't have to do heavy exercise. It's better to stay within your comfort zone and slowly increase your activity levels. Be creative about ways to do this. For example, you might try doing some mild exercises while watching TV, taking a 15-minute walk during your lunch break or planning a family outing around an activity you all enjoy.

## An active lifestyle takes time to build

Exercise has many positive effects on mental health, but you may not see the benefits right away. And if you don't enjoy the exercise, it's hard to stick to a routine. To get started, think of activities you enjoy and brainstorm ways to build them into your schedule. It's usually best to start with small, realistic goals. Some people find that it's easier to stick to a routine when they exercise with a friend or spouse.

## Too much exercise can be too much of a good thing

Some people feel like they have to exercise when the healthier option would be to rest, such as when they're injured, ill or haven't eaten enough. This is more likely to be a problem when people are very concerned about the way they look. Other times, people take on too much because they want to see results quickly. And some people push themselves to keep up with a more advanced exercise buddy. Be gentle with yourself, set realistic goals and make sure to increase intensity gradually.

## A healthy lifestyle may be influenced by factors you can't control

It's important to recognize that a healthy lifestyle can be influenced by different factors. Here are some examples:

- **Some people experience increased pressure to look a certain way.** Teenage girls and boys, athletes with weight restrictions (like wrestlers or jockeys), dancers, models, actors and gay men are especially vulnerable to disordered eating given the high social pressures they face.
- **Your health can influence food choices.** Your appetite and energy levels can be influenced by chronic illnesses

(such as diabetes or Crohn's disease), pain conditions, mental illness, medications (for physical or mental health problems) and other medical treatments. Both health problems and treatment options can affect your wellness goals.

- **There are important external factors that influence the food people eat:**
  - **Insufficient income:** Income can have a large impact on your ability to access healthy foods. The costs of food itself can be a barrier. People living in smaller or isolated communities may also have to travel farther to buy a range of food, which can add to the costs. In other cases, people report that they avoid buying fruits and vegetables because they can't afford to buy something their family might not like or let spoil.
  - **Lack of time:** People who are busy — working, studying, spending time with their family — are more likely to rely on foods that are easily accessible or easy to prepare. Fast, healthy options aren't always available.
  - **Food choices within the community:** Some communities in BC, particularly in rural or remote areas, may only have limited food choices available to community members.
  - **Food options:** Unhealthy food choices are more available today than in the past.

Try talking to your family doctor, a dietician or local service provider for creative and manageable ways to make healthy choices.

## Do you find it hard to make healthy choices?

It's often hard to eat well and exercise when you need to. Exercise and healthy eating can help with negative moods, low energy levels and lack of fitness, but these things can make it harder to start exercising and eating well in the first place. Some people find that they eat more in the face of stress, especially food with less nutritional value like junk food or fast food. Other people find that they hardly eat at all. They may also feel too drained to exercise.

Remember to take it one day at a time. Each day is a chance to start fresh. Try to remind yourself that healthy living choices are especially important during times of stress and will help you feel better. It is important to look at the source of stress and explore other helpful coping options. See the full range of wellness modules at [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca) for more information and practical tips.

## quick tips for healthy living

Healthy living is all about moderation, balance and flexibility. There will be some days when you don't eat healthy foods and some days when you don't do enough exercise. This is totally normal in your busy, sometimes stressful, life. You get a more accurate picture of how you've been doing if you look back over the past month or so. For the month ahead, aim to make small changes that will improve your health, both mental and physical. Here are some ideas:

- Nourish your body throughout the day—avoid skipping meals.
- Eat a variety of foods and aim for a balance over the month.
- Eat slowly and without the distractions of TV, computers or smart phones
- Rather than worry about 'good' versus 'bad' foods, remember that moderation is the key.
- Try to eat more fruits and vegetables.
- Drink lots of water. It helps reduce fatigue and replenishes the body.
- Use caffeine in moderation, particularly if you are prone to anxiety or sleep problems.
- Listen to your body's signals—it will let you know when you are full or hungry.
- Become more conscious of why you eat when you are not really hungry. Try to find other ways to cope with feelings of boredom, unhappiness, loneliness or social pressure.
- Use exercise as a way to deal with stress.
- Slowly increase your physical activity level.
- Consider joining a gym or other formal exercise program.
- Check out your local community centre for a range of fun options and programs for people of all ages.
- Try adding in extra activity throughout your normal day, such as parking a block from work and walking the rest of the way or using the stairs instead of the elevator.
- Remind yourself that weight and shape are not the only way to evaluate your self-worth—think of at least one other way that shows you are a worthwhile, lovable, talented person who has something to offer the world.

You don't have to make big changes to improve your wellness and maintain good mental health. When it comes to healthy eating and exercise, every little bit counts!

### Select sources and additional resources

- Visit [www.healthlinkbc.ca/dietitian](http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/dietitian) or call 8-1-1 to speak to a dietician for free.
- Visit [www.healthyfamiliesbc.ca](http://www.healthyfamiliesbc.ca) for Healthy Families BC. You can find healthy living tips, guides and programs in BC.
- Visit [www.mdabc.net](http://www.mdabc.net) for the Mood Disorders Association of BC's Food as Medicine program for people who are diagnosed with depression, bipolar disorder, fibromyalgia, or an autoimmune disorder with mood concerns.
- Visit [www.hc-sc.gc.ca](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca) for Health Canada's helpful tips and resources, including Canada's Food Guide.
- Visit [www.dieticians.ca](http://www.dieticians.ca) for healthy eating tips from Dietitians of Canada.
- Visit [www.povnet.org](http://www.povnet.org) for low-income food resources in BC.
- Visit [www.exerciseanddepression.ca](http://www.exerciseanddepression.ca) to access the Exercise and Depression Toolkit created by researchers at UBC, clinicians and other community partners on healthy ways to incorporate exercise in depression recovery.

### Endnotes

- 1 NEDIC. (2011). Canadian Research on Eating Disorders. <http://nedic.ca/sites/default/files/Canadian%20Research%20on%20Eating%20Disorders%20-%20Formatted.pdf>