

Healthy Weight and Cancer Risk



This information sheet is about how your weight influences your cancer risk. It is based on research evidence and has been written for the general public.

Key Messages

Most people know that maintaining a healthy weight is the ideal and that being overweight and obese is not good for their health. However many people do not realise that being overweight and obese increases the risk of getting some types of cancer.

Experts say there is convincing evidence that being overweight increases the chance of getting cancer of the bowel, kidney, pancreas, oesophagus, endometrium and breast (after the menopause). They also say it may increase the chance of getting gallbladder cancer.

Bowel and breast cancers are two of the three most common cancers in New Zealand.

You can reduce the risk of these cancers by keeping at a healthy weight. Weight gain happens when energy eaten as food and drink is greater than the energy used in physical activity. Healthy eating and regular daily activity help achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

Are you overweight?

Most people know they have put on weight by the fit of their clothes and by weighing themselves but many people do not know how much weight is too much.

There are two ways for adults to measure whether their weight is healthy or not - by taking a waist measurement and by working out your body mass index (BMI).

Measuring the size of your waist indicates how much fat you have around your middle. This is important as fat stored around your waist is more of an indicator of possible health problems than fat stored on the hips, thighs and bottom. A waist measurement of more than 80cm for women and more than 94cm for men is an indicator of being overweight. The bigger your waist measurement is the higher your risk of developing health problems.

Use a tape measure - at the navel for men and at the narrowest point of the waist for women.

Risk to health	Men	Women
Average risk	< 94 cm	< 80 cm
Increased risk	94-101 cm	80-87 cm
Substantially increased risk	≥ 102 cm	≥ 88 cm

Body Mass Index

To work out your BMI measure your height in metres and your weight in kilograms. Use these numbers to work your BMI like this:

Weight (kg)	
Height (metres) x Height (metres)	
For example:	
Weight - 90kg	Height - 1.7metres
$\frac{90}{1.7 \times 1.7} = 31$	
BMI = 31 See table below for what this means	

Classification	BMI European and Asian adults	BMI Māori and Pacific adults	Risk of obesity related diseases
Underweight	< 18.50	< 18.50	Low
Normal range	18.50- 24.99	18.50-25.99	Normal
Overweight	25.00-29.99	26.00-31.99	High
Obese	≥ 30.00	≥ 32.00	Very high

BMI is not a suitable measure for children. For people with very high muscle development (e.g. elite athletes) the BMI may not be accurate as muscle is heavier than fat. Different BMI cut off points are also used for different ethnic groups in New Zealand. Māori and Pacific adults tend to have a higher percentage muscle and Asian people a lower percentage than European adults.

Keeping a healthy weight

To maintain a healthy body weight you need to balance the energy you get from food and drink with the energy you use up in physical activity. Even if you are not overweight you need to be aware of balancing energy from food with what you use in activity, to stay at a healthy weight.

Weight loss is more likely to be successful and lasting if you make gradual, realistic changes which improve the way you eat and increase physical activity on an everyday basis. Avoid crash or fad diets and exercise binges - they don't work long term. If you turn your life upside down you are unlikely to stick to the changes for long enough to make a real difference. Look for gradual, ongoing weight loss.

Healthy Eating Tips

- Eat at least 5 servings of fruit and vegetables every day. More is even better. A serving is about one handful.
- Have wholemeal and wholegrain breads and cereals instead of refined cereals, white bread and sugars.
- Choose fat reduced milk, dairy foods, spreads and dressings.
- Try to reduce the amount of sugar you eat and drink. Make soft drinks, fruit juices and energy drinks special occasion treats only. Have water as your “everyday” drink.
- Choose low-fat ways to cook - boiling, poaching, grilling, baking, microwaving or steaming rather than frying. Use a non-stick pan and a spray of oil when pan-cooking or browning foods.
- Trim the fat from meat, take the skin off chicken, and try not to have processed meats that contain a lot of fat e.g. salami, sausages, or luncheon sausage too often.
- Watch portion sizes. Use a smaller plate, resist seconds and avoid ‘supersizing’ and ‘combos’ when eating out.
- Don't skip meals, especially breakfast - you usually just eat more later in the day if you do. Try to establish regular eating patterns.
- Drink little or no alcohol. Save it for special occasions.
- Sit at a table to eat and focus on the meal rather than eating in front of the TV or eating on the run. Eat slowly and wait 15 minutes after finishing your meal before deciding to have another helping of food.
- Drink water - sometimes thirst is mistaken for hunger.
- Read labels to check energy, fat and sugar content of processed food. Choose foods with lower levels.

Physical Activity Tips

For cancer prevention, the scientific evidence suggests the more physical activity the better. Research now suggests that **60 minutes or more of moderate activity** (like brisk walking, mowing the lawn or medium-paced swimming) or **30 minutes or more of vigorous activity** (like aerobics, jogging or fast cycling) every day may be best to **reduce** your risk of cancer. This activity will help you lose weight and/or maintain a healthy weight.

Try to be physically active every day and think of movement as an opportunity, not an inconvenience. You do not have to join a gym to be active.

- Take the stairs, not the lift.
- Get off the bus/train one stop earlier and walk.
- Walk over and talk to your colleagues instead of sending an email.
- Go for a brisk walk at lunchtime.
- Park further away from your destination and walk.
- Walk with a friend or join a walking group.
- Take a dancing class.
- Try an exercise class at the local community centre or gym.
- Do some simple stretching exercises while watching television.
- Be vigorous when doing housework like vacuuming or mowing the lawn.
- If you can, you should also undertake some regular vigorous exercise for added health and fitness.
- Choose activities you enjoy, and those that fit into your routine. If you are inactive, any increase in daily activity is beneficial.
- Have some active fun such as bike riding, ball games or join a sporting team.

For information and support phone the Cancer Information Helpline **0800 CANCER (226 237)** or go to www.cancersociety.org.nz . This information sheet was written in April 2009 by the Cancer Society of New Zealand. The Cancer Society's information sheets are reviewed every two years.