

Weight Management in Seniors

By Cinda Williams Chima

Nutri Q&A

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Q: I've had a weight problem most of my adult life and I'm now 50 pounds overweight and struggling to lose even 10 pounds. I weigh, I measure, I count calories, eat lots of fruits and vegetables, 2 teaspoons of fat, around 6 ounces of protein, two glasses of skim milk, whole grains - all the good stuff. The hospital dietitian said I should eat about 1400 calories a day, and she's checked my daily records for a two-week period. My metabolism is 1330, checked through the Medina Hospital nutrition office.

At most, I lose one pound a week, and after a few weeks that slows to about a half-pound or less.

I [walk] 1.25 miles per day...and I am gradually increasing the speed and distance. I do hand weights two or three days a week - 15 pounds on the arms, 17 on the legs, and Pilates the alternate days.

Basically, I'm in quite good health, but it is certainly discouraging to keep such a strict program and not see much progress in weight loss. I'm 73 and find it harder and harder to get the weight off. It's been there so long it just doesn't want to budge! -CJJ

A: CJJ, it sounds like you are doing a stellar job, and I can tell you're frustrated that you're not seeing more dramatic results. But you're getting great support, and a pound a week is a great rate of weight loss for someone of your age and metabolic rate.

As you know, weight management is a function of the balance between calories in and calories burned. Let's begin with the intake side of the equation.

Because you're working with relatively small numbers (1400 calories) hidden calories can make the difference between maintaining and losing weight.

Common Sources of Hidden Calories

- Be especially wary of restaurant meals, dinner parties and the like. Even relatively plain entrees can have fat added in cooking and sauces. Restaurant portions are large, and most people feel self-conscious about whipping out the food scale or ruler in a restaurant
- Beverages can deliver lots of calories without filling you up. Sodas, sweetened waters, sweetened coffee and tea, and designer coffee beverages all contribute. A large mocha can contain as many as 700 calories.
- "Diet" items that may be low in fat or low in sugar, but still contain significant calories. For instance, "sugar free" candies are often sweetened with sugar alcohols like sorbitol or mannitol. These provide 1.5 to 3 calories per gram vs 4 calories per gram in sugar. Many low fat bakery items are still high in calories. Check labels.

- Portions: Portions are tough to estimate in certain foods. A bagel counts as two bread servings in many diet plans. But a Bruegger's whole wheat bagel contains 390 calories and 73 grams of carbohydrate. That's roughly equivalent to five slices of bread.
- Healthy doesn't necessarily mean low calorie. Au Bon Pain's Mediterranean chicken wrap has 570 calories and 16 grams of fat (and 980 mg of sodium).

The other side of the equation is energy burned. Metabolic rate declines as we get older, both as the result of loss of lean body mass and changes in activity. Studies show that this decline is not inevitable. Distance runners, for example, maintain lean body mass and a high metabolic rate as they age. But you don't have to be a distance runner to increase your metabolic rate through exercise.

I don't know what your actual body weight is, but if, as you say, you are 50 pounds overweight, your metabolic rate seems low. Metabolic rates tend to decline in chronic dieters.

Ways to Increase Your Metabolic Rate

- Try to resist the notion of going on a diet (which suggests that eventually you will go off.) Only make changes that you can maintain for a lifetime. Temporary restrictions in eating habits make you feel deprived and don't result in permanent weight loss. Worse, they can lower your metabolic rate.
- If your doctor okays it, continue to increase your walking. A pedometer is a good way to track your progress by counting steps.
- Weight training is also a good way to build lean body mass, and has been shown to be beneficial in older adults. It may take time to see results. Again, make sure you have appropriate guidance from your doctor and exercise specialist.

Finally, you should know that healthy weight ranges in older adults seem to be different than in middle age. In younger adults, overweight is defined as a BMI of 25-29.9, while obesity is defined as a BMI of 30 and above. In older adults, persons in the overweight category actually have a lower mortality rate than those with lower BMI's. Naturally, a healthy weight for you will depend on your overall health and weight-related chronic conditions (you mentioned that you have hypertension.)

Some researchers also suggest that many of the health conditions associated with obesity are actually the result of lack of fitness. Even if you are not able to get down to the weight that you desire, maintaining and increasing physical activity can improve your health in multiple ways.

Go here to find a BMI calculator from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute.

<http://www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi/>