



THE PLAIN DEALER

A HEAVY BURDEN

Where parents fail, peers can succeed

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Maybe your teenager has asked for help in losing weight or improving his or her health habits. Or maybe you're worried about your teen's weight and don't know how to raise the subject.

Teens are hypersensitive about their appearance. Battles over weight can fan the flames of parent-teen conflict.

So where do you start, and how do you proceed? Do diets popular with adults work for teens? Are they safe? Should your child try to lose weight or just "grow into" the weight she's at? How important is exercise?

Unfortunately, where teen weight management is concerned, there is not a lot of well-designed research into what works and what doesn't. In fact, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force concluded that there wasn't enough evidence to recommend - either for or against - routine obesity screening and intervention in children or adolescents.

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the Institute of Medicine have published guidelines for weight management in children and teens. But the organizations admit that there's not much to go on.

So, to find out how teens lose weight and keep it off, registered dietitian Anne Fletcher interviewed more than 100 formerly overweight teens from across the United States for her new book, "Weight Loss Confidential" (Houghton-Mifflin, 2007; \$26). The book was inspired by Fletcher's own son, Wes, who weighed 270 pounds in high school but lost 65 pounds before starting to college. Solon resident Lisa Weiss, 25, was one of the teen weight-loss successes interviewed for the book. She was featured in a previous story for this series.

More than half of the teens Fletcher interviewed became overweight before age 10.

Eighty-six percent had at least one overweight parent.

Most had tried to lose weight numerous times before they succeeded.

When asked why they thought they had gained weight, the most common reasons were too much snacking, large portion sizes, not enough exercise, too many sweets and desserts and emotional eating.

The teens Fletcher followed lost an average of 58 pounds using a variety of healthy methods. Some enrolled in behavioral programs such as Shapedown, a national weight-loss program for children and teens. Some attended weight-loss camps. Some used medically supervised programs and were counseled by dietitians. Eighty-six percent exercised more, roughly half cut back on fat, 42 percent said they cut out certain foods completely and about 30 percent counted calories. Twenty-six percent said they continued to eat all foods, just less.

Fletcher asked the teens what finally motivated them to lose weight successfully - often after multiple tries. Many said they wanted to improve their health, as well as their appearance, to improve

relationships and to avoid teasing and ridicule.

Included in her book are descriptions of weight-loss programs the teens used and a listing of Internet resources.

Bottom line? It's not research, but these teens' real-life stories may be encouraging to their peers and their parents who are looking for help and examples of success.

Fletcher sums it up neatly: Teens typically don't listen to adults - be they their parents, dietitians or other health professionals. But they do listen to each other.

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