

The Healthy Way to Lose 20 (or 200) Pounds

If you're overweight, it's only a matter of time before your health goes downhill. Research shows those extra pounds could lead to serious illnesses, from heart disease to cancer to diabetes and more.

But some folks are dropping the extra weight and keeping it off, thanks to medically supervised weight-loss programs.

Shedding the Weight

John Blair used to be too heavy to walk comfortably around the block. But now that he's lost 162 pounds, it's easy.

"I feel great," he said. "I feel great about it. It does have results. And that's what's making me feel great."

He's talking about the medically supervised weight-loss program in which he's participating at Virginia's Bon Secours Weight Loss Institute.

Just eight months ago he tipped the scales at a staggering 526 pounds, barely able to squeeze into size 66 jeans. But now those jeans are far too baggy for him to wear.

Blair said he's thrilled to once again be able to climb steps one foot per stair and to have enough energy to rake the yard.

He wants to lose about another 100 pounds in order to reach his goal of 250, the same weight as when he was in the military.

Supervised Success

The medically supervised weight loss program produces fast results and motivates you to stick with it.

Participants have four meal replacements a day, which means no outside foods at all. The meal replacements used by The Bon Secours Weight Loss Institute are the New Direction Weight Control System.

"They're powders," Blair explained. "Some of them form into soups, some are puddings, and some of them are just shakes. And then they do have bars you can substitute one a day. It's satisfying. It really is."

Blair is especially glad to have gotten off some of his medications and to have gotten rid of his unhealthy belly fat. After failing with other diets, he hasn't cheated one bit on this one, not even during the holidays.

"My food was coming," he recalled. "I knew it was coming. I didn't have to have the ham and the yams. I didn't have to have that."

His supervised weight loss took place under the watchful eye of Dr. Phillip Snider, director of the Bon Secours Weight Loss Institute.

"We check a patient's lab test," he explained. "We check a person's medication list to see if they're on medications that may be promoting weight gain."

"So I may suggest medication changes from that aspect," he continued. "We also look at how their medication needs change during their weight loss because someone on insulin is going to need a much lower dose of insulin. Their blood pressure medicines may decrease."

Keeping It Off

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, reducing your weight by 5 percent is considered "significant weight loss." This medically supervised program can lead to a 30 percent drop.

“Compare that to bariatric surgery: they may be down 40 to 50 percent of their original weight. So we’re getting changes similar to, not as much as, but similar to bariatric surgery, and people aren’t having to go through the surgery,” Snider pointed out.

Anyone who has ever dieted knows that losing the weight is only half the battle. The other half is keeping it off. One of the keys of the medically supervised weight loss program is accountability.

Participants regularly gather at least weekly to discuss their progress and challenges. Their encouragement and support are invaluable. Then, they keep in touch daily through social media.

They also meet regularly with a dietitian, like Barbara Mekkes, to learn how to make good choices once they’re back on real food.

“When people start realizing the role of protein, fats, and carbs in the diet, they get a sense of empowerment,” she said.

Mekkes teaches her clients to avoid sugars, especially high fructose corn syrup. She advises steering clear of starches, like bread.

When it comes to fats, she recommends staying away from hydrogenated oils, also known as trans fats. And she said folks are better off avoiding the highly refined oils like corn, vegetable, and others that make up most of the oil aisle at the grocery store.

On the other hand, Mekkes said some saturated fats, like coconut oil, are healthy, as are the natural oils like olive oil. But she warned not all olive oils are the same.

Since its popularity has taken off, some olive oils contain highly refined materials. To know whether yours is good,

Mekkes suggests placing it in the refrigerator. A good olive oil will turn cloudy after it's been in there a few hours.

"I encourage people as much as possible to go to the expeller pressed or cold-pressed fats," she added. "Those are more fats that are straight from the origin."

The Right Amount

Even if you're eating healthy food, you can still gain weight by eating too much of it. That's where a "portion plate" comes in handy.

It's an actual plate that's divided into sections indicating what to eat and how much of it. That way, participants in the program train themselves to eat the right amount.

And the right amount isn't just important when it comes to food. Getting the right amount of sleep also can make a difference.

"We've talked several times about how sleep, how you're producing ghrelin in your stomach," Blair said. "If you don't get enough sleep, the ghrelin takes over and that makes you hungry. Things like that I never knew before."

Snider also recommends his patients wear a "fitness tracker" on their wrist, which reminds the wearer to stay active.

"A lot of them will send your smart phone a text message when you've been still for more than an hour," he explained. "(It will) tell you 'time to get up and move.' Some of them will give you a vibrating alarm when it's time to get up and move."

A Longer, Healthier Life

Finally, there's the emotional component – what was behind the weight gain in the first place.

"A lot of people do have a food addiction or they turn to food

during times of stress or anger or boredom," Snider explained.

"And so our goal is to try to teach people alternative ways to get that relaxation, the break from the stress, maybe some of the relief from the boredom in other ways besides turning toward food," he said.

So whether you have 20 pounds to lose, or more than 200 pounds like Blair did, a medically supervised weight loss program may be just what you need for a longer, healthier life.