



June 25, 2011 – Austin, Texas

Small Changes

When we attempt to lose weight, we generally make drastic changes in our eating and exercise habits. But that isn't the way we put weight on, even though it seems like that sometimes. How do people usually gain weight? And are there particular foods that contribute to our weight gain more than others? Let's take a look at the latest research published this past Thursday in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (1).

The Study

Researchers used data from three major studies: the Nurses' Health Study, the Nurses' Study II, and the Health Professionals Follow-up Study. They reviewed the responses of subjects to questionnaires about health habits including what they ate and how much they exercised, along with smoking, sleeping, and television watching. These studies began between 1986 and 1991, and subjects completed questionnaires every four years over the course of 20 years. That gives 20 years of follow-up to track changes in those health habits as well as the criterion variable: body weight.

What's interesting to me is that the researchers included in their analyses only subjects free of disease and not considered obese when the study began. That's important because this allowed them to track the change in body weight and BMI in over 100,000 subjects who started at or close to normal body weight for their height, with a mean initial BMI of 23.7.

What is the rate of weight gain over 20 years in subjects who start at normal weight? If they gain weight, how much do they overeat? How much do they exercise? That's what the researchers wanted to know, so let's take a look.

The Results

The average weight gain in all three groups combined was 3.35 pounds for each four-year period. That corresponds to a total of 16.8 pounds in 20 years or just about one pound per year. That confirms what I've always said: no one goes to bed at 150 pounds and wakes up at 200; it takes years of chronic overeating to get there.

Were there differences in the foods that people who gained weight tended to eat? Yes. Potato chips, potatoes especially French fries, sugary beverages, unprocessed red meat, processed red meats, and sugary treats were eaten more frequently by people who gained weight. On the other hand, people who had a tendency to lose weight ate more yogurt, vegetables, fruit, nuts, and whole grains over the four years.

One of the most revealing graphs in the article illustrated that when divided into quintiles by food intake and physical activity, the highest weight gain were in those subjects who ate the most servings of the foods that tended to promote weight gain and were the most sedentary. They ate more and they moved less. And, folks, that's a recipe for buying bigger pants on a regular basis.

A Closer Look

Like every study, this one has some limitations. Food frequency questionnaires give a snapshot of what a person eats at one point in time, not what they eat over months or years. However they used the same questionnaire at every testing point. While it can track only the entire group and not individuals, it does show what types of food contributed to weight gain.

I think it's also important that they tracked the increase in body weight of normal-weight people over that time frame. The popular misconception in dieting studies is that people lose weight, gain it back, and then gain some more. This study supports a study I did years ago that showed that whether a person was normal weight or overweight, they still gained the same percentage of weight over five and ten years. The people who lost weight and gained it back would have gained it anyway. That's important to acknowledge so people will stop trying to blame dieting for increasing their weight. It was never about messing up metabolism or any other things you hear—it was always about not making permanent changes in eating and exercise habits.

The Bottom Line

There are three important findings from this study.

1. Weight gain happens slowly at about one pound per year. I've consistently written that overeating just 100 calories per day yields 10 pounds per year, but often it's even more subtle than that.
2. If you want to prevent the weight gain, eat more starch-free vegetables, fruits, whole grains, nuts, and yogurt and eat less chips, starchy vegetables especially potatoes, processed and unprocessed meats, and refined carbohydrates.
3. You must exercise consistently; it will not help you lose a lot of weight by itself, but it will help prevent weight gain.

I like this study because it clearly showed that no matter how complicated we make things, getting to a healthy weight is a matter of eating less and moving more. Small changes make a big difference.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

References:

1. N Engl J Med 2011;364:2392-404.

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