

# THE WEIGHT- LOSS PUZZLE

Maybe your latest **BLOOD WORK** wasn't great, or your **WAISTBAND** fits more snugly than you'd like. Here's what experts want you to know about setting **REASONABLE GOALS** for keeping **EXCESS POUNDS** from adding up.

BY ARRICCA ELIN SANSONE  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDRE RUCKER







**SLOW, SUBTLE WEIGHT GAIN IS COMMON AS WE AGE**, influenced by a number of factors including genetics, poor sleep, stress, and the loss of muscle mass that typically occurs with every decade. “Most of us do tend to gain weight as we get older,” says Lawrence Cheskin, M.D., professor and chair of the department of nutrition and food studies at George Mason University and coauthor of *Weight Loss for Life: The Proven Plan for Success*. “But forget about how much you weighed years ago. The question is, what’s a reasonable weight for you now?”

In fact, weight doesn’t tell the whole story of your health. There’s also the percentage of fat, bone, and muscle in your body. “What’s important is to maintain muscle and bone mass,” says Nikhil Dhurandhar, Ph.D., past president of the Obesity Society and chairman of the department of nutritional sciences and Helen Devitt Jones Endowed Professor at Texas Tech University. And, he adds, if you need to

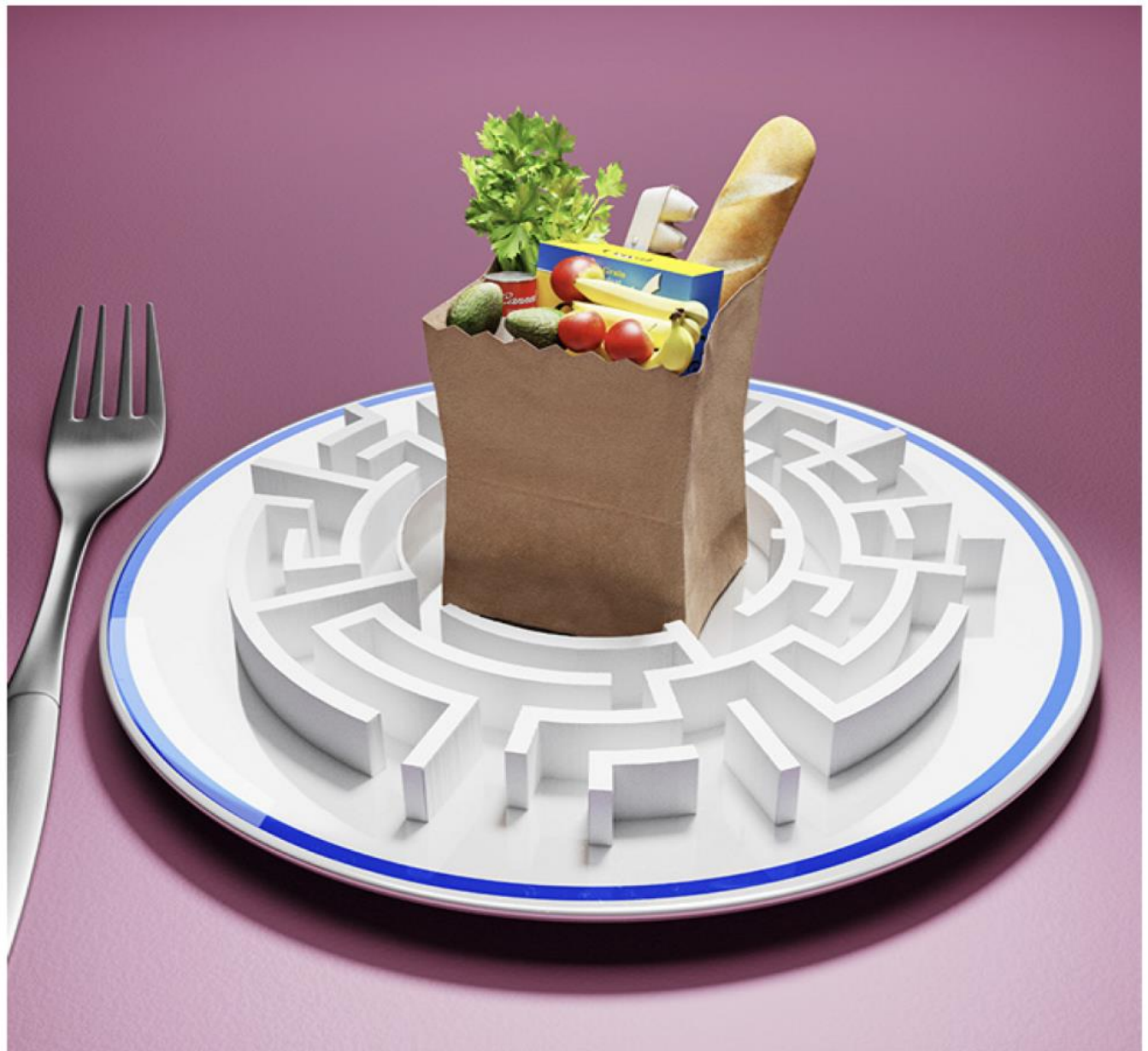
shed pounds for your health, focus on fat loss, not weight loss.

Where excess fatty tissue is distributed also matters, says Dr. Cheskin. Fat around your middle is riskier: Visceral fat, which surrounds organs such as the kidneys and the spleen, produces chemicals that damage blood vessels, influence blood sugar levels, and increase the risk of conditions such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. If you store fat around your belly, it’s particularly important to maintain a healthy weight.

## SETTING THE RIGHT HEALTH GOALS

Healthy bodies come in different sizes, so you and your doc should discuss your objectives. “If you’re dealing with rising blood sugar or blood pressure, these things are fixable,” says Dr. Cheskin. For instance, you don’t have to fit into the pants you wore before you had kids, but you can discuss what amount of weight loss would help you achieve your goal of lowering your blood pressure.

Be proactive. “Maybe you don’t have any health complications now. But for people who are overweight, there’s a higher risk of developing metabolic problems such as diabetes or high cholesterol and biomechanical issues such as joint pain,” says Eduardo Grunvald, M.D., medical director at the Center for Advanced Weight Management at UC San Diego Health. “We want to reduce health risks so that prediabetes doesn’t become diabetes, for example.”



Sometimes health care providers use body mass index (BMI), a ratio of weight to height, to determine whether you should lose weight, but BMI is not an accurate gauge of overall health, especially for people of color. If you would like to move away from BMI, you can ask your doctor to avoid weight conversations and use other markers, such as blood pressure and cholesterol, to evaluate your health risks.

## **STEP** **1** **TRACK YOUR HEALTH**

To adopt better-for-you behaviors, figure out where you are right now.

### ■ **LOG YOUR HABITS.**

Maybe you've been having large-portioned restaurant meals every week. Or maybe you're walking less than you think. Keeping a food and fitness



journal can help you see what you're actually doing versus what you believe you've been doing. It's tedious, but it raises your awareness of your choices, says Dr. Cheskin.

### ■ **LOOK IN YOUR MEDICINE CABINET.**

Many medications, including some antidepressants, beta blockers for blood pressure, and gabapentin for pain, can affect weight, says Dr. Grunvald. If you and your doctor have gauged that your weight is unhealthy, ask about alternatives to meds that may cause weight gain or make it harder to lose weight.

### ■ **IF YOU USE A SCALE, BUY THE RIGHT ONE.**

Look for an inexpensive bioelectrical impedance analysis (BIA) device, which measures the rate at which a painless electrical current travels through various tissues (more slowly through fat, faster through lean tissue). "If your weight hasn't changed, say, because you have retained some water, you may get frustrated," Dhurandhar says. "This tool shows you how much fat you've lost, even if your body weight has not changed."

### ■ **STOP NEGATIVE SELF-TALK.**

The topic of weight is often loaded with self-judgment. Check those feelings at the door. "If you think you could do better, don't moralize it. You're not a bad person," says Charlotte Markey, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at

Rutgers University, Camden. "This belief that we can modify our body shape to be anything, especially as we age, is not realistic. The perspective should be, what health behaviors can we control?"

## STEP 2 **CONSIDER WHAT'S ON YOUR PLATE**

**Obsessing over food can be harmful, but being mindful of what you eat and making healthy choices is essential for wellness in general as well as to avoid unwanted pounds.**

### ■ **FORGET ABOUT MAGIC-SOUNDING DIETS.**

Diets that promise miraculous results may seem like a good way to jump-start weight loss, but they target our vulnerabilities and often tout claims with no scientific backing. "We want to believe in them for an easy fix. There is nothing wrong with expecting one, but there's a lot of quackery," says Dhurandhar. It's fine to follow a reasonable plan such as the DASH diet, which limits foods that are high in saturated fat and sodium, or the Mediterranean diet, which focuses on plant-based foods and limits red meat and sweets, says Dr. Cheskin. But avoid any extreme diet, such as one that eliminates all refined carbs, because it's not a long-term fix.

## WHY SLEEP MATTERS

••• A growing body of research has shown that people who get too little sleep have a higher risk of weight gain and obesity. Sleep impacts hormones such as ghrelin, leptin, and cortisol, so you may feel hungrier and less full and be more likely to crave comforting foods when you're tired, says Dr. Cheskin. It's also tougher to make sensible food choices when you're exhausted and cranky.

New research indicates that sleep deprivation also may up visceral fat accumulation. In a small study, young, healthy people ate more when sleep-deprived yet gained only two pounds. "But when we measured visceral fat, it had increased 11%," says study author Virend Somers, M.D., Ph.D., Alice Sheets Marriott Professor of cardiovascular medicine at Mayo Clinic. "What we learned is that looking at weight alone may cause you to underestimate the metabolic consequences of

sleep deprivation."

How do you know if you're getting enough zzz's? If you wake up to an alarm instead of spontaneously, if you're sleepy when driving, or if you fall asleep when on the sofa watching TV, you probably need more sleep, Dr. Somers says. Most adults need seven to nine hours per night. Try sticking to a bedtime routine and schedule, making your room dark and cool, and disconnecting from technology and bright lights at least an hour before bedtime.

### ■ **START SMALL.**

Everyone wants instant success, but you'll set yourself up for failure if you're too restrictive. "The research is clear that drastic diets don't work. We don't like to be deprived," says Markey. A couple of small modifications are easier to stick with. So instead of, say, cutting out all sugar and alcohol, decide to have dessert once a week, or perhaps enjoy only a weekend glass of wine.

### ■ **KEEP IT EFFORTLESS.**

You need to make it easy on yourself, says Dr. Grunvald. Put a bowl of peeled oranges in the fridge so you'll grab

those instead of chips. Roast several veggies on Sunday so you'll simply have to reheat them to serve with weeknight dinners. If you know you'll down an entire bag of peanuts in one sitting, buy single servings. Order groceries online and pick them up at the store to save time and avoid impulse purchases.

### ■ **MAKE MEALS SPECIAL.**

Put a tablecloth on your kitchen table with a nice centerpiece or candle. Then, when you have a snack or a meal, sit down at the table (not your desk or coffee table!), stash your phone away, and give your food the attention it deserves.



### ■ **LISTEN TO YOUR BODY.**

One of the more challenging aspects of weight maintenance or loss is learning how to tune in to your body, says Dr. Cheskin. Ask these questions when you eat: *Am I hungry? Is this the best choice? Do I need more, or do I just want more?* This isn't about judgment; it's about being honest with yourself to figure out what triggers eating if you're not hungry. (Boredom? Anxiety? The fact that someone else is eating?)

STEP

3

## **THINK ABOUT HOW YOU'RE MOVING**

**Regular exercise can help with everything from bone and joint health to blood pressure and blood sugar to your mental health.**

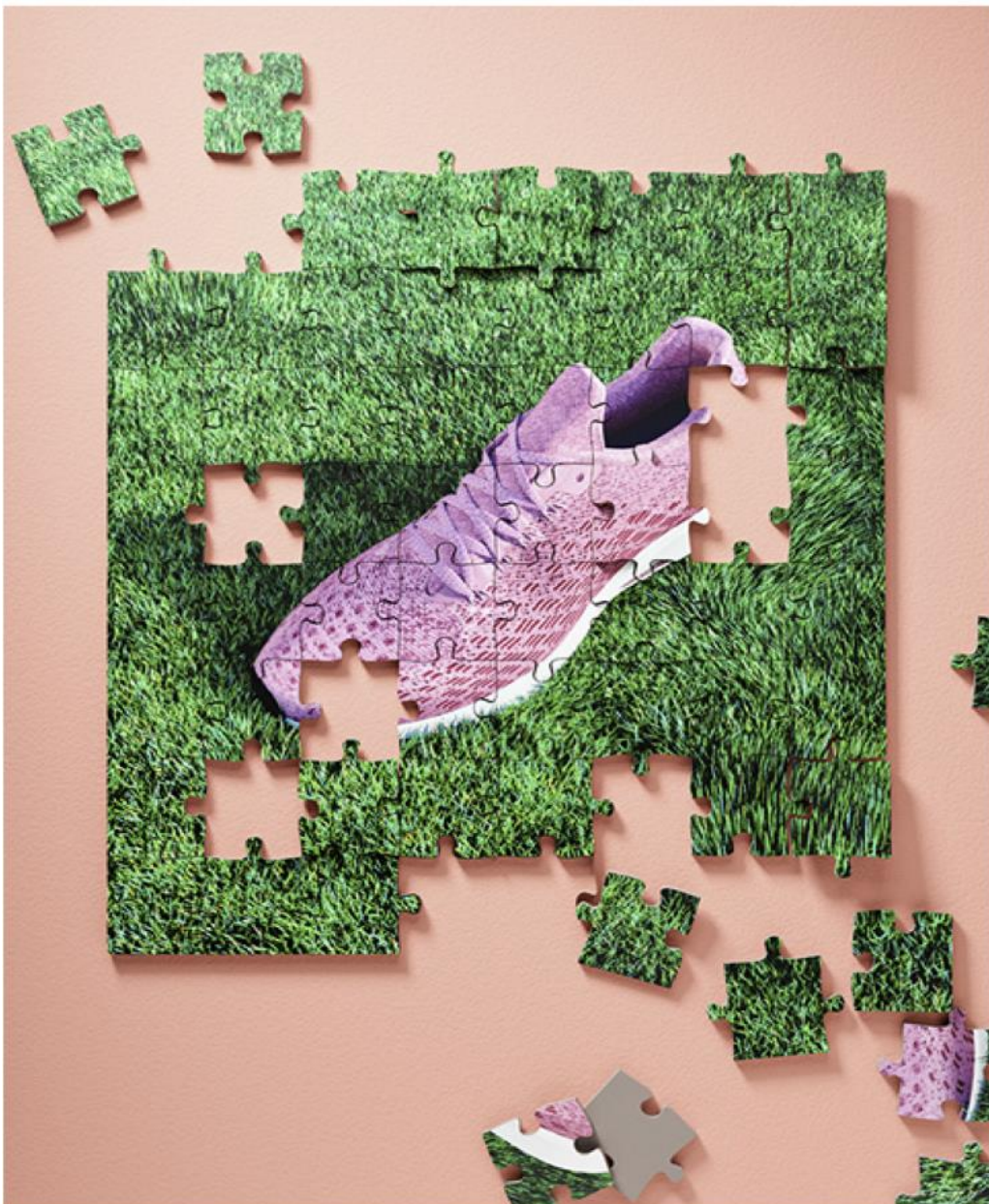
### ■ **TRY NEW WORKOUTS.**

When it comes to exercise, “break out of all-or-nothing thinking and embrace

a more experimental mindset,” says Lee Jordan, master health coach with the American Council on Exercise and an adjunct professor of kinesiology and integrative wellness at Point Loma Nazarene University. “Maybe start running twice a week and see how it goes. Or try two days of weight-bearing exercises. Then reassess. The best exercise is the one you’ll do.”

### ■ **STEP UP YOUR STEP GAME.**

Walking is one of the best activities for all ages and fitness levels. “You don’t have to perspire to get benefits,” says Dhurandhar.





“Weight-bearing activity, such as walking, maintains bone and muscle mass.” Measure steps with a fitness tracker or a pedometer to stay mindful of how much total movement you’re getting. Or try fast-paced intervals, which can burn up to 20% more calories: Choose an amount of time, a number of steps, a distance to travel, or even a part of a song to listen to—bust your butt until you finish the interval, then recover and repeat.

### ■ **FIND AN OUTLET FOR STRESS.**

Stress can derail healthy behaviors by causing us to crave sweets or alcohol or avoid physical activity, says Dr. Cheskin. It also interrupts sleep (see box on page 33). Find strategies that help you cope: Go outside and get moving, stay in and color, take a bath, meditate, or call a friend and rant.

### ➔ **THE BOTTOM LINE**

Reframe your perspective and accept that bodies change with age. “There are changes, but we’re lucky if we get the opportunity to grow older. After the last few years, we’ve survived a lot. If you’re still here, you’ve already won. Be grateful for where you are,” says Markey.

## HELP YOUR KIDS LOVE THEIR BODIES

●●● As parents and adults, we have the potential to shape how kids view themselves. “The goal is that our bodies are sources of strength, functionality, and wonder,” says Charlotte Markey, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Rutgers University, Camden, and the author of *The Body Image Book for Girls* and *Being You: The Body Image Book for Boys*. “Let’s not socialize kids to think bodies are ‘problems’ that need

to be fixed with diets.” Try these tactics:

- ▶ Avoid comments such as “I feel fat”; this turns fat into a feeling, which it isn’t.
- ▶ Make food fun by having kids help plan meals, shop, and cook.
- ▶ Let kids trust their own sense of hunger and fullness. No “clean plate club”!
- ▶ Don’t moralize food by calling it “good” or “bad.” All foods can be part of healthy eating.
- ▶ Find activities to enjoy together like shooting hoops, hiking, or chasing the dog around the backyard.

Staying at a healthy weight is a life-long journey and not every technique works for everyone, so choose what’s effective for you. By making small changes and becoming more mindful about eating, sleep, and stress management, it’s possible to outsmart significant weight gain. “Even if you gain weight over the next couple of decades but you make every effort to change the trajectory so it’s 20 pounds instead of 50, that’s a victory,” says Dhurandhar.