Obesity – Its Assessment and Control
Part III: Losing and maintaining weight

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The first three questions dealing with the measurement of obesity, its health risks and factors affecting body weight were addressed in my previous columns. This article addresses the final question concerning weight loss.

Maintaining optimum body weight is ideal. But I should hasten to add that losing even a relatively small amount of weight results in significant benefits. These health benefits persist if such modest weight loss is maintained.

Losing weight is easy. Keeping it off is a challenge. Obesity is a complex and a multi-factorial problem. Its control requires a comprehensive plan. Such a plan should consist of a healthy diet, physical activity and lifestyle changes.

Healthy diet

A low fat diet with complex carbohydrate such as whole-wheat and brown rice, and legumes, fruits, vegetables, dairy products and grain is a healthy diet with many benefits. One gram of fat has 9 calories as compared to only 4 calories in one gram of carbohydrate or protein. So when you eat a diet low in fat your caloric intake is lower, and you still get to enjoy your meal without having to compromise much on its quantity.

In general, the goal of every overweight individual should be to lose 1/2 to 1 pound a week. This can be achieved by reducing 250-500 calories in your diet a day. Weight loss from very low caloric diets is not well maintained, and a diet of less than 800 calories a day may lead to health problems.

A brief comment about high-protein high-fat diet, which has been in the news recently and has become quite popular among many people in the US. A variety of similar options are also available in the Gulf Arab nations. While you may temporarily lose weight on such diets; they have a potential of producing negative effects.

Physical activity

Physical activity burns calories, builds lean muscle mass and helps in weight maintenance. It improves fat distribution and improves psychological functioning.

The Centers for Disease Control recommends, “Every US adult should accumulate 30 minutes or more of moderate-intensity physical activity on most, preferably all days of the week”.

The goal should be a gradual increase of activity over the current levels, and progression to a level that achieves cardiovascular and physical fitness over several weeks. Walking briskly (at the rate of 3-4 miles an hour) for about 30 minutes a day is all you need.

For most healthy people desirous of initiating a moderate level physical exercise program, consulting a physician is not necessary. However, men older than 40 years and women older than 50 years who plan to embark on a vigorous exercise and those with chronic health problem should consult their doctor to help them design a safe program.

Physical activity should be medically safe, enjoyable and convenient. The effort and time should go into the activity and not in its preparation.
Behavior and other life style changes

Behavior therapy is known to be helpful. Stress reduction techniques such as meditation, relaxation and yoga have long-term beneficial effects. Focus on positive changes such as “feeling good” and “having more energy”.

Other methods

Appetite suppressant medications have been successfully used for short-term weight loss. The effects, however, are limited to periods when medications are taken. The medications are not without side effects. Surgical techniques such as gastric bypass and gastroplasty may benefit only select grossly obese patients, but they are not without complications.

Caution for individuals with medical problems

Many individuals with obesity, and chronic health problems may require medical evaluation. Pregnancy state and unstable mental illness warrant temporary exclusion from weight reduction programs. Also, weight loss is not indicated in problems such as anorexia nervosa and terminal illness.

It is beyond the scope of this column to discuss the role of government and private sectors in controlling the obesity epidemic. However, it should be mentioned that government policies aimed at prevention, education, and other initiatives such as those related to nutrition could be very helpful in controlling the problem of obesity. Partnerships with private and non-governmental organizations should also be encouraged to address the problem.

Overweight individuals have available to them many self-help effective approaches. Simple and focussed dietary, physical activity and behavioral interventions have been proven to be beneficial. Use them to your advantage to control your weight and stay healthy all your life.

Tips for weight loss/maintenance strategies:

- Discipline yourself on a low fat and portion controlled balanced diet.
- Don’t deny yourself the foods you enjoy. Eat them in moderation.
  - Avoid irregular eating habits.
  - Find ways and means to remain active.
- Gradual changes in dietary patterns and physical activity are more likely to be beneficial than quick and drastic changes.
- Monitor your physical activity and eating habits. Weigh yourself once a week.
- Don’t be discouraged if you fail; the only way to succeed is to keep trying.
- Don’t be alarmed if you see marginal fluctuations in your weight.
- Seek support from friends, family and your health care provider, when needed.