The Weight Loss Challenge

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), obesity—defined as a body mass index* of 30 or greater—has significantly increased since 1985. For example, in 1987 in Washington state, fewer than 10% of the population was considered obese. That statistic increased to 10–14% by 1993, 15–19% by 1998, 20–24% by 2002, and 25–29% by 2007.** The national media, diligent in reporting these trends, have moved overweight and obesity into common conversation topics across the country. With televised programs such as “The Biggest Loser,” “Ruby,” and “Dance Your Ass Off,” private struggles have become very public.

As a result of the nation’s bout with obesity, weight loss is often at the forefront of many people’s thoughts. People everywhere try to find ways to drop extra weight, often as quickly as possible, which aligns well with our societal value on instant gratification. As too many discover, however, quick do-it-yourself plans incorporating specialized low-calorie diets, perhaps coupled with over-the-counter stimulant products, are repeatedly unsuccessful. And it’s no wonder. How can the average individual expect to lose weight in an era when fast food is immediately available, cheap, and tasty? How can that same person schedule a regular exercise program when work and home demands continue to increase? The answer: there is no easy way to lose weight. There will be some, maybe considerable, discomfort involved. Furthermore, weight loss maintenance will most likely require a permanent change in lifestyle habits. With adequate preparation, determination, and effort, however, almost anyone can meet weight loss objectives.

A first step in the weight loss process is recognizing an effective endeavor will take time. There are 3500 calories in one pound of fat. With seven days in one week, a person using diet alone would have to reduce calorie intake by 500–1000 calories a day in order to lose one to two pounds in a week. People who lose much more weight in a short period of time are doing so due to water and other non-fat tissue loss. Calorie restriction alone can be challenging, but the body may also adapt to the challenge, requiring fewer calories to keep its systems efficiently working. Adding exercise to the prescription, however, should ease dietary restriction burdens. Moreover, the increase in metabolism associated with exercise gradually, rather than immediately, declines following the physical activity session. So, caloric expenditure at rest can be greater when exercise is part of a person’s weight loss program.

Even those who learn weight loss requires time struggle with a subsequent step in the process: establishing a plan. What to eat? What
form of exercise is best? Learning about nutrition and exercise, knowing one’s likes and dislikes, and being flexible can be invaluable. For example, food pyramids are helpful tools one can use to identify nutritious foods one can include in the diet to meet basic nutrition requirements while simultaneously keeping saturated fat and trans fat levels low. Identifying the most appropriate food pyramid will require a time investment and a self appraisal of food preferences. Any food allergies or insensitivities should also be taken into consideration when selecting a food pyramid.

An exercise regimen, similar to a nutritional plan, should be based on accepted best practices as well as an individualized approach. For example, aerobic exercise is considered the best form of activity to accommodate fat loss. The American College of Sports Medicine recommends moderate intensity exercise be included at least five days per week for 30 minutes per session, or vigorous intensity exercise be included at least three days for 20 minutes per session. Total body strengthening and stretching are also recommended two to three times per week. A person with specific needs or preferences relating to types of aerobic activity or workout intensity should incorporate them into a workout program. Adding running to one’s training plan may be unrealistic if the person dislikes running or if the activity triggers joint pain.

Weight loss is not easy, but it can be accomplished. Preparing one’s self through nutrition and exercise education, determining which approaches and activities work the most effectively, and persevering physical, mental, and emotional challenges during the process with a goal in mind are all important contributions to the entire process.

*Body mass index, or BMI, is a health measurement related to body weight and height. Although there are most definitely limitations associated with interpreting the index, it is an easy to calculate number that seems to have some predictive value of health disease risk.