

The Risks of Being Underweight

With the rise in obesity rates around the world, the risks associated with being underweight tend to be overshadowed. Being underweight is defined as having a body mass index (BMI) of 18.5 or less. If you are underweight, consider consulting with your healthcare professional to make sure that you don't have any underlying medical conditions and help you develop a plan to bring your weight up to a healthy range, and to rule out an eating disorder.



The Risks

Although being lean can often be healthy, being underweight can be as detrimental to your health as being overweight. Here are a few of the conditions that people who are underweight might experience:

Weakened immune system. Your immune system cannot fully function due to lack of nourishment. You're more likely to catch a cold, the flu, or other infections, and it can be more challenging for your body to heal properly from wounds. You are also at greater risk for developing cancer.

Nutritional deficiencies. Being underweight is often due to not eating a healthy, balanced diet, which can mean your body doesn't have the nutrients it needs. This can lead to conditions such as fragile bones, anemia, gum disease, loss of teeth, dry skin and hair, and vision problems.

Lack of energy. This can be tied to deficiencies in iron, folate, and B-12, which can cause anemia.

Female reproductive issues. Being underweight causes hormonal imbalances in women which can disrupt the menstrual cycle. This can make it more difficult to get pregnant, increase the chances of having a miscarriage in the first trimester, and can result in delivering premature or underweight babies.

Eating disorders. Being underweight can be a sign of an underlying emotional or mental disorder, resulting in eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa. Eating disorders can cause other health issues including low blood pressure, muscle deterioration, and stunted growth.

Healthy Ways to Gain Weight

Once any underlying health conditions have been ruled out, you will want to continue working with your doctor to create a plan to bring your weight into the healthy range (BMI between 18.5 to 24.9). Here are some tips to help you gain weight gradually and safely:

Eat more meals a day. Five to six smaller meals during the day rather than three large meals can help you take in more calories in a sustainable way. Make sure to incorporate nutrient-rich foods like whole-grain breads and

pastas, fruits and vegetables, dairy, and lean protein. Healthy fats from nuts and seeds can also be important additions to your diet.

Swap your soda for a smoothie. Rather than turning to diet soda or coffee for a boost, try drinking smoothies or healthy shakes. If you make them with milk and fresh or frozen fruit, you'll be getting the calories and nutrition you need in a way that feels different than sitting down for a meal.

Start snacking. Incorporate a morning and afternoon snack between your meals. Just remember to keep the food healthy. Nuts, peanut butter, cheese, dried fruits, hummus, and avocados are all nutrition-packed ways to get necessary vitamins and minerals.

Think toppings. Adding them will help up the calorie count on your regular meals. Try topping scrambled eggs with cheese and chopped veggies or add avocado to chili for a cooling treat full of healthy fat.

Exercise. Strength training is a great way to gain weight in a healthy way because it helps build muscle mass. It also has the added benefits of stimulating your appetite and helping you get a better night's sleep.

Be mindful of how you treat yourself. No matter what your health goals are, you should be mindful of fat and sugar. Relying on high-calorie foods like chocolate and cakes to gain weight can increase your risk of developing high cholesterol levels. However, a treat occasionally is OK so long as it gives you the nutrients you need in addition to calories.

Get support. If you are struggling with an eating disorder, chances are it will take more than simply increasing your calorie intake to get yourself back to a healthy weight. Consider looking for a counselor who specializes in eating disorders or join a support group—there are many different types out there. Find what works for you!

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