When Weight Loss Isn’t a Good Thing

Our society puts so much focus on being thin, it’s easy to think that losing weight is great, no matter what. But that isn’t true. In some situations, losing weight can cause health problems or make existing problems worse.

Losing weight is not a good thing when:
- You are sick or recovering from an illness or infection
- You are preparing for surgery, or healing after surgery
- You are going through major medical treatment, such as chemotherapy
- You lose too much weight too fast
- You lose weight without trying, and you don’t know why

Losing weight when you’re sick, having surgery, or going through medical treatment such as chemotherapy or radiation can make it harder for your body to recover. Your body needs plenty of calories, protein foods, and good nutrition to help you heal, prevent infections and preserve strength. Losing too much weight when your body is trying to recover can cause problems, including:
- Slower wound healing
- Muscle loss
- Loss of strength and energy
- Lower immunity to viruses and infections
- Malnutrition (eating too little to support your body) – even in people who are overweight

Losing weight rapidly can cause all of the above problems, and it can make weight management harder in the future. That’s because rapid weight loss causes rapid muscle loss. You need your muscle and strength to recover.

Losing weight without trying to is also called “unintended weight loss,” and may be a sign of a number of health problems ranging from mild to serious. Unintended weight loss always needs to be checked out by a doctor, so don’t wait too long to check.

What if you’re overweight?
You might think that losing weight in these situations is OK if you’re overweight, because “I have a lot to lose” – but that’s definitely not true, either. No matter what your weight, getting enough calories and protein each day to support health and healing is extremely important. Overweight and obese people can become malnourished quickly during an illness or after surgery, when the body’s protein and calorie needs are higher.

If you have any questions about how much you should be eating, please talk to your health care provider or ask for a referral to a registered dietitian.
How much weight loss is too much?
Losing a lot of weight over a short time can be a health concern when you are sick or going through surgery or other treatments. Significant weight loss is:

- Losing more than 2% of your body weight in 1 week
- Losing more than 5% of your body weight in 1 month
- Losing more than 7.5% of your body weight in 3 months
- Losing more than 10% of your body weight in 6 months

Here are some examples of unhealthy weight loss when you are ill – you can use these as a rule-of-thumb for when to let your health team know:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>If you weighed:</th>
<th>And 1 week later, you weigh 2% less, or:</th>
<th>Or 1 month later, you weigh 5% less, or:</th>
<th>Or 3 months later, you weigh 7.5% less, or:</th>
<th>Or 6 months later, you weigh 10% less, or:</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>125 pounds</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>112</td>
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<td>150 pounds</td>
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<td>175 pounds</td>
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<td>200 pounds</td>
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What to do if you suspect a problem
If you’re worried that you or someone you care about may be losing too much weight, here are some things you can do:

- Weigh yourself at least once a week, write it down, and share your numbers with your doctor or dietitian. Using a weight record may be helpful.
- Add higher-calorie foods to your meals and snacks. High-calorie foods such as whole milk, cheese, avocados, olive oil, nuts and peanut butter can be added easily to help prevent too much weight loss.
- Include protein in meals and snacks. Good protein sources include eggs, milk, cheese, yogurt, nuts, seeds, peanut or almond butter, beans and lentils, tofu, meat, fish and protein powders.
- Ask for advice if you have trouble eating enough. If you have a problem that makes it hard for you to eat enough – such as mouth pain, chewing or swallowing problems, stomach trouble or no appetite – talk to your doctor, dietitian, dentist or swallowing specialist. Your doctor may be able to treat the problem so you can enjoy eating again. A dietitian can help you find foods you can eat that will help you maintain your weight while taking your health issues, lifestyle and preferences into account. A swallowing specialist can help you find foods with the safest textures to swallow.

Don’t let weight loss go too far. If it continues for too long, it can lead to malnutrition, which can be very dangerous. Please talk to your health care provider if you have any questions or concerns, or make an appointment with a registered dietitian.

Providence Oregon Outpatient Nutrition Services
Providence.org/nutrition

This information is for general educational purposes only – always follow your doctor’s recommendations, and check with your doctor or registered dietitian if you have any questions.