



Slow fat loss key to lasting weight loss

Obesity stories filled up more news slots last week than usual. The Journal of the American Medical Association published an article that summarized causes of death in the United States during the year 2000. Poor diet and inactivity accounted for about 400,000 deaths, or 16.6 percent, just behind tobacco, which is still the leading cause of death at 18.1 percent.

Also, hundreds of news sources carried the story that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration might soon ask food manufacturers and some restaurants to provide better labeling, with the intent of lowering obesity.

Despite the real health message that Americans need to improve their diets and become more physically active, too many people will only "hear" that they need to lose weight. As a consequence, books, programs and products promising weight loss will grow in popularity. The problem with strictly focusing on weight loss and not fat loss will be that most of these approaches will provide only short-term success and ultimately fail

because they do not result in a healthy diet and increased activity.

We think it is time to hammer home the essential concepts of "Weight Loss 101":

-- Being overweight is not the problem. Being over-fat and unfit is the problem.

-- Merely losing weight should not be the goal. Developing a state of fitness is the goal.

-- Eating a good diet is the goal. Losing body fat will happen gradually.

Question: Why lose body fat gradually? Why not quickly?

Answer: Rapid weight loss is not fat loss. Quick fat loss is not possible. One pound of body fat contains about 3,500 calories. To put that into perspective, a 200-pound person needs to run about 24 miles to expend enough calories to lose a pound of fat tissue.

In contrast, the body's storage form of carbohydrate, called glycogen, only contains about 450 calories per pound because it binds up water. To lose a pound of weight from glycogen, our 200-pounder only needs to jog three miles.

Weight loss also can be due to loss of muscle tissue, which contains about 330 calories per pound. Body protein can be lost when diets are too low in protein and carbohydrate.

If someone tells you they lost a pound, you should ask, "A pound of what?"

Q: What does "eat a good diet" mean?

A: With respect to weight control and weight loss, it describes a diet that meets a person's nutrient needs, is moderate in calories and provides a wide variety of wholesome foods to promote good health.

Many quick-loss diets do not meet nutrient needs. They can provide quick weight loss from loss of glycogen, muscle protein and associated water. But little fat is lost.

A significant amount of weight loss from muscle protein reduces the body's calorie needs, making it more difficult to maintain a lower body weight. Unless weight loss comes primarily from fat loss (slow weight loss), it can become more difficult to lose body fat and easier to gain it.

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