

HEALTHY WEIGHT

after a spinal cord injury

How spinal cord injury affects weight

People often experience dramatic weight changes after a spinal cord injury. Many people lose a lot of weight, especially in the first 3-6 weeks. This is because the body burns through extra fuel as it works to repair itself, leading to a loss of muscle and fat stores. Food intake may also be less. The goal at this stage is to reduce muscle loss.

As your body recovers, you will start to regain weight. Your metabolism (the rate your body uses energy) slows down due to less physical activity and reduced muscle stores. If you are overweight, you may want to minimise how much weight you regain.

Unfortunately, reduced muscle function also means your body will need less fuel than it did before the injury. If you eat the same as you used to eat, you will become even bigger than before the injury.

In the long term, the tendency is to gain weight. For most people, it requires effort to prevent this. Following a spinal cord injury you will also have a lower ideal body weight. This is because muscles that are affected by the injury become smaller. If you are overweight, you may want to improve your health and wellbeing by losing some weight.



How much does the injury affect weight?

Paraplegia: 5-10% reduction in body weight
Tetraplegia: 10-15% reduction in body weight



How does this affect my ideal weight?

Weight before injury: _____ kg
Previous ideal weight: _____ kg
Ideal weight after spinal cord injury: _____ kg

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Weight is all about balance. It is not good for your health and wellbeing to be either underweight or overweight. It is best to be somewhere in between, a healthy weight.



Consequences of being underweight

- Increased risk of pressure areas due to bones pressing on skin
- Difficulty regulating body temperature
- Lack of energy & tiredness
- Increased risk of illness and longer recovery times

Consequences of being overweight

- Difficulty with transfers (harder for carers as well)
- Increased risk of pressure areas (more weight bearing on skin)
- More wear and tear on joints (especially shoulders)
- Increased risk of certain health conditions
 - heart disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer etc
- More stress on equipment so it needs replacing more often
- Getting too big for your wheelchair
- Sleep problems

Weight can also affect how you feel about yourself

Healthy weight loss

If you need to lose weight, you want to reduce body fat rather than muscle. This is why it is best to lose weight slowly, at 0.5kg-1kg per week. It also helps if increased exercise is part of your plan. If you become acutely unwell for any reason, aim to keep your weight the same until you are better. When you are well, you can lose weight again.



How do I manage my weight?

By balancing the amount of energy you get from food or drink with the amount of energy your body burns up.
Read further to understand more...

What do you mean by “energy”?

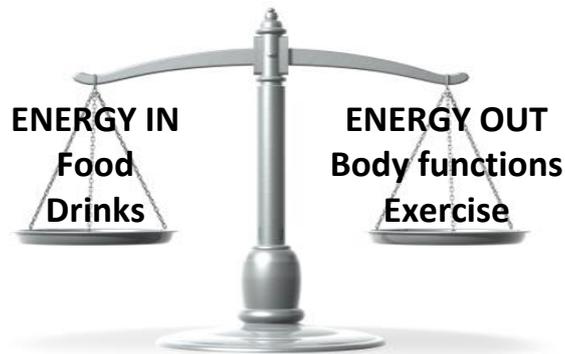
Energy from food and drink is the fuel for your body. Imagine it is like the fuel you put in a car.



Cars need fuel to keep them going. If you put too much fuel in your car, it will overflow and spill onto the ground. But cars are different to us. Our bodies do not overflow. Instead, if you put too much fuel into your body, your body just stores it as fat.

Understanding “energy balance”

There is no magic to weight management, just a simple scientific principle known as “energy balance”



If your ENERGY IN is **more** than your ENERGY OUT...

you will **gain** weight

If your ENERGY IN is **less** than your ENERGY OUT...

you will **lose** weight

If your ENERGY IN is **the same** as your ENERGY OUT...

you will **stay the same** weight



How do we measure “energy”?

Energy from food and drink is measured in kilojoules (kJ) or calories (kcal). Most people still refer to “calories” but the new units used in New Zealand are kilojoules.



My weight goal

My current weight: _____ kg Date: ____ / ____ / ____

My weight goal: _____

Make your weight goal realistic and achievable

*As little as 5% weight loss can make a difference to your health
Preventing further weight gain might be the first goal for some people*

Tips to help you reach your goal

- Have regular meals 3 times each day
- Eat breakfast every day
- Make half your plate non-starchy vegetables
- Watch your portion sizes
- Have fruit for snacks
- Choose lean meat and trim the fat before cooking
- Choose low-fat options
(e.g. low-fat milk, edam cheese, lite coconut milk)
- Avoid deep-fried foods (e.g. fish and chips, fried chicken)
- Cook without adding extra oil or butter
- Limit takeaways
- Limit pies and pastry foods
- Limit alcohol
- Avoid “fizzy drinks” and cordial or replace with diet versions
- Limit sweet foods like biscuits, cakes, chocolate, ice-cream
- EXERCISE! Talk to your physiotherapist for ideas. Exercise on its own is unlikely to lead to weight loss. You will also need to make changes to your eating



Sugar and fat increase “energy density”

Foods (and drinks) high in fat and sugar are concentrated sources of energy. This means they are more likely to contribute to overweight and obesity.

Support makes a difference. Ask a family / whānau member or friend to help you. Consider making healthy changes together.

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