

Searching for long-term success in weight management? Forget dieting and eat regularly

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Early adulthood is particularly critical for putting on weight. According to a recent study conducted at the University of Helsinki, common factors among young women and men who succeeded in managing their weight in the long term included eating regularly rather than dieting.

"Often, people try to prevent and manage excess [weight](#) and obesity by [dieting](#) and skipping meals. In the long term, such approaches seem to accelerate getting fatter, rather than prevent it," says Ulla Kärkkäinen, a researcher and licensed nutritional therapist at the University of Helsinki.

The study on [weight management](#) conducted at the University of Helsinki was part of the extensive FinnTwin 16 study, with more than 4,900 young men and women as participants. The study subjects answered surveys mapping out factors impacting weight and weight change when they were 24 years of age, and again ten years later at the age of 34.

Most subjects gained weight during the decade in between. Only 7.5 percent of women and 3.8 percent of men lost weight over the period. Between the ages of 24 and 34, the mean gain in women was 0.9 kg per year, while in men the corresponding gain was 1.0 kg.

In addition to dieting and irregular eating habits, women's risk of gaining weight was increased by giving birth to two or more children, regular consumption of sweetened beverages and life dissatisfaction. In men, an additional factor increasing the risk of gaining weight was smoking. Factors protecting from [weight gain](#) were physical activity in women, while in men, they were a higher level of education and greater weight at the beginning of the study period.

Focus on primary weight management, not on dieting

In the current environment, succeeding in long-term [weight management](#) is particularly challenging. The scientific knowledge gained so far on successful weight management is primarily based on studies where the subjects first lost weight and then started managing it.

"To effectively prevent weight gain, understanding the factors underlying weight management that precedes the gain, or primary weight management, is of utmost importance," notes Kärkkäinen.

Exercise and [healthy eating habits](#) are considered the cornerstones of weight management. However, according to this long-term population study, even more essential to successful weight management is refraining from dieting and observing regular eating habits, in both women and men.

The factors underlying successful weight management seem to change between the short and long term. These factors are also partly gender-specific.

"Generally speaking, weight management guidance often boils down to eating less and exercising more. In practice, people are encouraged to lose weight, whereas the results of our extensive population study indicate that losing weight is not an effective weight management method in the long run," says Kärkkäinen.

"Prior research has shown that approximately every other adult is constantly dieting. According to the National Institute for Health and Welfare, nearly a million Finns diet every year. Even though dieting may seem a logical solution to weight management problems, it can actually increase weight gain and

eating problems in the long run."

The research findings prove that instead of losing weight, it is more important to focus on eating regular meals, ensuring wellbeing, and finding a more general sense of meaning in life. Regular and sufficient meals support the natural biological functions of the body, and help in managing one's [eating habits](#) and weight management in the long term.

"Our findings demonstrate that weight management would benefit from an increased focus on individual differences, as well as perceiving the factors that impact human wellbeing and the sense of meaning in life as a broader whole," Kärkkäinen says.

The study has been published in the international *Eating Behaviors* journal. The study was led by Associate Professor Anna Keski-Rahkonen.

More information: Ulla Kärkkäinen et al, Successful weight maintainers among young adults—A ten-year prospective population study, *Eating Behaviors* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.eatbeh.2018.03.004](#)

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