

# Top tips for maintaining a healthy lifestyle

People with a learning disability are more likely to be severely overweight (obese) than people in the general population; in fact, women with learning disabilities are more likely to be obese than men.

Obesity can result in multiple health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes and mobility difficulties.

Diet and exercise are the two biggest factors to losing weight. For most people, bringing their weight down to healthy levels involves both exercising more and eating healthier foods including enough fruit and vegetables, as well as avoiding things such as fattening foods and sugary drinks.

## People with learning disabilities are less likely to do regular exercise and eat a balanced diet.

There can be lots of reasons for this:

- Sometimes the full benefits of getting active and leading a healthy lifestyle aren't properly explained or understood.
- It is thought that it takes more time to cook a healthier meal, especially when alternatives such as ready meals are available.
- Some medication can make people put on weight, which needs to be properly monitored.
- Accessibility can be a barrier for places like the gym and swimming pools which are not always easy to get to, seen as expensive and unwelcoming for people with a learning disability.
- Risk assessment issues can stop people from doing physical exercise, and alternative options aren't always looked into.



## Supporting someone to lose weight

It is important to think about the lifestyle of the person you support, and where necessary, support the person to make changes such as including more physical activity in their daily routines or changing meal times, snacking habits or portion sizes. Staff should be on hand to provide motivational and practical support, with a consistent approach from everyone who is supporting the person to lose weight.

## 10 top tips for helping the people you support to maintain a healthy lifestyle:

- 1. Planning is key:** Help the person you support to plan and cook healthy meals, with a balance of foods they enjoy and new food they may want to try.
- 2. Upskill yourself:** All staff have access to resources on the Health Noticeboard, which contains good information on buying and cooking healthy food.
- 3. Any movement is better than no movement:** Encourage the person you support to be more active by being creative. Have a dance in the living room or look up seated workouts – there are lots of ways to be more active.
- 4. Track progress:** Everyone loves seeing the progress they've made, so even when it's early days, keep the person involved with their Weight Chart to keep motivation high.
- 5. Focus on interests:** Try to find activities that the person enjoys doing that are more active, or if it's not an activity that involves a lot of movement, try and incorporate movement in. If the person enjoys swimming, suggest a weekly trip to the local swimming pool.
- 6. Join the community:** There are also lots of weight loss programmes and groups in local communities. You could find out more information about these and offer to support the person to take part.
- 7. Alternative rewards:** Using food and drink as a reward is bad practice. Instead, try using something such as a star chart for completing exercise, eating well or losing weight.
- 8. Be a role model:** Are you living a healthy lifestyle? Think about if you are a good role model for healthy choices.
- 9. Annual health checks:** Encourage the person you support to attend an annual health check. This is a good opportunity to think about weight management.
- 10. Stay hydrated:** Encourage the person you support to drink plenty of water, add in sugar-free squash if this is preferable.



## Choice, duty of care and making informed decisions

It is often difficult to balance the issues of choice and duty of care around diet and exercise when supporting someone with a learning disability, which is harder when someone is seen to be making unhealthy choices.

However, it must be remembered that people do have the right to make unwise choices if they have the capacity to make the decision to do so, as long as they have the right information and have support to properly understand the risks and consequences of the choices they are making.

Support Workers have an important role to play in ensuring the person being supported is making informed choices about their diet and exercise and that the decisions are put in place when someone lacks capacity to do so themselves.

## Jordan, a Senior Support Worker from Milton Keynes, told us how she supported Faye to achieve a healthier weight by using the MacIntyre Weight Chart.

*Faye, a person we support, has lost quite a bit of weight during the three years the service has been running. From her heaviest weight of 9 stone, 11 pounds, to currently being 8 stone, 1 pound, she has lost an incredible 24 pounds, which is such an achievement considering she is not even 5 foot in height.*



*With Faye's eating, it has really been about the small changes that have made a big impact. When we first started working with Faye, she would have three meals a day, but then also a sandwich and crisps at around 8pm in the evening. We had to slowly reduce this; we found that Faye loved bananas so these were a really good alternative to crisps.*

*We then discussed with her about only making half a sandwich, then over time changing half a sandwich to a piece of fruit. Small steps made a really big impact. It really is about finding what the person really enjoys and offering those as alternatives.*

*One of the other things that we changed around the start of 2016 was Faye's milk, from a green top semi-skimmed to a red top skimmed milk. Faye has always drunk a lot of milk – she has around six cups of milky tea a day and will drink warm milk at night-time as well as having it in her porridge. Some days Faye easily got through three pints of milk. In terms of the levels of fat Faye was consuming, this small change made a really big difference. We spoke with Faye about the benefits of skimmed milk and trialled it, and it worked!*

*We also kept a food diary of what Faye had eaten each day to enable staff to ensure that she wasn't getting too much of something or lacking in something else. One thing that this helped us to identify was that Faye was often given food when she appeared upset or anxious, even if she wasn't asking for food. However, now Faye only has snacks when she wants them, which she rarely does.*

*"Small steps made a really big impact. It really is about finding what the person really enjoys and offering those as alternatives."*

*We have made an effort to make sure that even though we are conscious of Faye's weight and diet, she still has the foods that are important to her. She has a hot breakfast every morning (even in the summer), whether it's eggs, beans or porridge. We also visit her Dad's chip shop twice a week for dinner.*

*We are all so proud of the progress that Faye has made with her weight, even with other factors out of her control affecting it.*



If you have any questions about how to use any of the documents in the Health Documents folder, or specifically about a healthy lifestyle, please join our Health Special Interest Group or email Sarah Ormston, Specialist Health Advisor: [sarah.ormston@macintyrecharity.org](mailto:sarah.ormston@macintyrecharity.org). You can also join the Health Special Interest Group on Yammer to keep up with the latest news and share best practice.