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Weight Loss and the Older Adult: Risks and Benefits[1]

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Adults who are obese are often advised to lose weight to reduce the risk of chronic disease (Jensen et al. 2014). However, the health benefits of weight loss change as we become older (DiMilia, Mittman, and Batsis 2019). This publication discusses the risks and benefits of planned and unplanned weight loss for older adults.

Obesity is associated with a higher risk of many chronic diseases, including heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Weight loss may reduce the risk of developing chronic diseases and conditions and improve quality of life (Leslie and Hankey 2015). Weight loss may also make it easier to be physically active. However, the "obesity paradox" describes the observations that some excess weight may serve a protective role for older adults, but the relationships between weight status and health risks are complex (Bosello and Vanzo 2019). Although obesity is associated with improved survival of serious illnesses (Toft-Petersen et al. 2018), obese older adults with low muscle mass are at higher risk for poor outcomes during and after critical illness (Tieland, van Dronkelaar, and Boirie 2019). Obesity may delay stroke recovery (Kalichman, Alperovitch-Najenson, and Treger 2016), but in contrast, it improves recovery following hip fracture (Nishioka et al. 2020).

Obesity is defined as a body mass index (BMI), a ratio of height to body weight, of greater than 30. The BMI range with the lowest mortality (risk of death) includes higher BMIs for older adults compared to younger adults. This suggests older adults may benefit from slightly higher body weights than younger adults (Bhaskaran et al. 2018). See the following link to calculate your BMI. https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/lose_wt/BMI/bmicalc.htm.

Is weight loss planned or unplanned?

Whether weight loss is planned or unplanned is an important consideration for an obese older adult. Unplanned weight loss, referred to as unintentional weight loss, is linked to health risks. Unintentional weight loss from midlife to later life is associated with mild cognitive impairment (Alhurani et al. 2016). In older women, unintentional weight loss is associated with an increased risk of fracture (Compston et al. 2016). Unintentional weight loss is also associated with functional decline (Ritchie et al. 2008) and, when combined with low muscle mass, is related to a poor quality of life in community-dwelling older adults (Kim, Kim, and Won 2018). Significant unplanned weight loss may affect survival (Cao, Hardy, and Wulaningsih 2019).

Case Study

Susan is your 79-year-old neighbor. When you told her that she looked like she had lost some weight, she happily replied with, "Yes, I've lost almost 15 pounds!" Susan has been overweight for most of her life and obese for the past 15 years. Is Susan's recent weight loss a good thing?

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Why is unintentional weight loss common in older adults?

Unintentional weight loss is often due to reduced food intake resulting from a lack of appetite. Lack of appetite may result from disease conditions, medications, loneliness, or depression (Gaddey and Holder 2014). Chewing and swallowing difficulties due to dry mouth, medications, or conditions such as stroke, dementia, or neuromuscular disease may also lead to reduced food intake and unintentional weight loss (Christmas and Rogus-Pulia 2019). Consuming a texture-modified diet may help to maintain safe swallowing and food intake but may decrease quality of life (Swan et al. 2015). Other barriers to adequate food intake in older adults may include a lack of finances to purchase enough nutritious foods and difficulties with shopping or preparing food.

If an older adult is unintentionally losing weight, he or she should visit a healthcare professional to determine the cause of the weight loss and how to address it. It is very important for older adults to follow up with their healthcare provider because the weight loss may be due to an undiagnosed disease such as cancer (Bosch et al. 2017).

What can be done to avoid unintentional weight loss?

It is important for older adults to enjoy a high quality of life, remain able to perform activities of daily living, and maintain their independence. When unintentional weight loss occurs, older adults and their healthcare team should develop strategies to identify and manage issues related to unintentional weight loss. A comprehensive team of health professionals may include a dietitian, physician, occupational therapist, physical therapist, speech-language pathologist, dentist, and social worker. Nutrition and lifestyle adaptions may improve dietary intake and prevent further unintentional weight loss. Below are some tips to help prevent unintentional weight loss, especially muscle loss.

Tips for managing unintentional weight loss:

- Consume adequate calories to meet energy needs
- Consume more high-protein foods such as meat, poultry, seafood, eggs, and dairy
- Consume more plant-based proteins such as soy, legumes, nuts, and seeds
- Replace low-fat dairy with full-fat dairy foods
- Consume snacks or nutritional supplements between meals
- Discuss any chewing and swallowing problems with your healthcare provider
- Discuss the risks and benefits of any diet restrictions with your healthcare provider

The registered dietitian nutritionist (RDNs) is the nutrition specialist on the health care team. For older adults, RDNs provide a vital service by providing medical nutrition therapies necessary to manage existing health conditions. RDNs help promote optimal nutrition to avoid unintentional weight loss and improve quality of life.

Intentional Weight Loss

Planned weight loss may benefit some older adults (Wannamethee, Shaper, and Lennon 2005). If an older adult with obesity plans to lose weight, it should be done under the supervision of a healthcare provider. The safest and most effective way to lose weight is combining a healthy eating pattern and a physician-approved exercise program. This will lead to increased cardiovascular fitness, muscle strength, and lean body mass while minimizing the risk of malnutrition that can happen from reducing calories. Weight loss should not be pursued unsafely by eliminating food groups or following a fad diet. Weight loss is best achieved gradually with the individual's overall health and quality of life as priority. Always consult with your health care provider **before** beginning a diet or physical activity program. The following website provides reliable information on physical activity and aging: https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/exercise-physical-activity.

So, should Susan be congratulated for her weight loss?

It is important to determine whether Susan's weight loss was unintentional or planned. In either case, Susan should see her health care provider and come up with a plan to minimize any potential health risks related to weight loss. At the end of the day, Susan should focus on a healthful lifestyle that improves her overall wellness.

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