

Packing on pounds during COVID-19 and how to turn it around

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If you've gained weight during the COVID-19 pandemic, you aren't alone. The "Quarantine 15"—referring to weight gain some people have

experienced since stay-at-home guidelines went into effect—is likely due to a disruption in daily routine and habits.

"People's habits have changed quite a bit since we're spending more time at home," says Dr. Donald Hensrud, medical director of Mayo Clinic's Healthy Living Program. And those changes in habits can lead to health and medical issues down the road. Dr. Hensrud shares his thoughts on the disruption of habits and how people can find new habits.

"Now, I want to make a point for some people: getting enough food, getting enough calories and maintaining weight may be an issue," says Dr. Hensrud. "Some people may have to worry about maintaining their weight not unintentionally losing weight. But for many of us, our habits have changed."

Change in movement

"For example, people think about exercise right away, and they should," says Dr. Hensrud. "Fitness centers are closed, people may be doing less exercise and burning less calories through activity that way. What people don't think quite as much about though is low-level activity throughout the day. Even if we have a desk job, we have to walk at least to our car to get to work. We may walk throughout the day; we may walk to lunch. And, so, for spending time at home, that low-level activity may be causing us to burn fewer overall calories."

Consuming more calories

"We may be consuming more calories. On the good side, we're eating out less at restaurants. Sometimes that can be high-calorie. We still may be taking takeout at home, so there might be a little bit of a good thing there, a decrease in calories. However, many people are stocking up

frozen foods and processed foods that have a long shelf life. Many times, they're higher in calories and less healthy. On the flip side, for example, fruits and vegetables. They don't last as long, and we may be consuming less of them. There are a number of reasons why we might be at risk for [weight gain](#) through our habits that have changed, both in burning activity and in consuming more calories," says Dr. Hensrud.

Why weight gain matters

"A few pounds short term may not make a difference. It could be fluid. It might be just a little weight gain while we establish new routines. Obviously, the more weight we gain and the longer it's maintained, the more it affects our health," says Dr. Hensrud. "For children, for example, it's been shown that children's weight tracks to some extent. If children establish those habits, or lack of healthy habits when they're young and they gain weight, that might persist as they go into adolescence and adulthood."

"Similarly, with adults, as we maintain those habits, if we can establish a new routine, the longer this goes on, then we can arrest that weight gain and try and maintain a normal weight. It's more important for some people than others. For example, people who have diabetes or [high blood pressure](#). Just a modest amount of weight gain in some people, if they're sensitive to that, can increase their blood glucose and blood pressure, and they won't have as well a good control over these factors, over these conditions. So, it depends on the individual, it depends on their health conditions, and it depends on long-term habits or routines," says Dr. Hensrud.

Establish new habits

"With all habits, it takes time to establish them, so everybody is getting

accustomed to this new normal. I'd encourage people to establish those new healthy habits now. You have to be a little proactive about this, and that'll make it easier in the long term. Break out of your comfort zone," says Dr. Hensrud.

"Instead of giving in to large amounts of comfort food, this can be an opportunity to take foods that we may not think of as healthy—you can make burritos, bean burritos or even pizza. If you make it in the correct way, it can be a healthy food. Invest some time. Planning is a real key here if you plan ahead rather than just grabbing something at the last moment. Try and raise your culinary skills and do a little bit more cooking. It's an opportunity for that, too. So, if we can embrace this, embrace our new normal, look for opportunities to establish new healthy routines."

"Eating healthy and eating well don't have to be drudgery. It can and should be an enjoyable way to live. And if we can do that, then we can better manage our [weight](#) and our overall health during this pandemic," says Dr. Hensrud.

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