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One of the most frequent questions I hear during office visits is, "How much should I weigh?" This is always followed by, "How do I get there?" In the next few paragraphs I will give you my thoughts on diet and weight.

Ultimately being overweight increases your risk for many conditions including: diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, sleep apnea, arthritis, and cancer. The reality is being obese takes at least seven years off of your lifespan. The good news is that many studies show that as little as a 5% drop in your body weight can reverse much of this.

During your visit I will discuss body mass index (BMI). This is simply a measure of your height divided by your weight. There are many well designed studies that show BMI is an indicator of morbidity and mortality. A BMI of greater than 30 is considered obesity. Normal is between 19 and 25 and 25-30 is considered overweight. A BMI greater than 25 will increase your risk of disease.

Your weight and most BMIs are determined by many factors. Genetics clearly plays a role as can medical conditions such as thyroid disease and other hormone disorders. Some medications may also contribute to weight gain and problems losing weight. The main determinant, however, is your caloric intake. In fact, rarely do I find an underlying medical condition to explain a weight problem. This is good news because you can easily work on your calories.

The best way to understand weight is to know that eating 3500 calories over your base needs will cause you to gain a pound. Simply put, cutting 500 calories a day out of your diet will cause a loss of one pound in one week. The people who are most successful at weight loss do six things:

1. Eat less.
2. Increase activity.
3. Monitor weight and food intake daily.
4. Set reasonable goals (a 5-10% weight loss).
5. Eat three meals a day.
6. Drink a lot of water and avoid caffeine.

Most important is that it is not a diet but a permanent change in lifestyle that will bring

long term success. The type of diet you choose can be directed by medical conditions such as heart disease or diabetes. Ultimately, personal preference is the key. Choose a diet that you enjoy and can stay on for life. I feel that the South Beach Diet is the best and healthiest low carbohydrate diet available. I also feel that the Weight Watcher's plan is easily adaptable to every day life and has a proven track record. An important point for people who eat out is that most restaurants serve excessive amounts of food. Only eat one-half of the meal and take the rest home or share it with your spouse. By doing this you will save calories and money. I would also like you to avoid bread that is served at the table and drink a lot of water. Increased water intake will fill your stomach up and trick it into thinking that it is full. It is also a very healthy thing to do for the rest of your body.

Diet pills such as Phentermine, Meridia, and Orlistat are available and should be reserved for patients with health issues who are not losing weight. I am not a fan of any "natural medicines for weight loss". These medicines are unregulated by the FDA and have potential interactions and unknown side effects and are not studied for safety. The surgical options are reserved for patients where the severity of obesity is impacting the patient's health in such a way that the risk of the disease is greater than the risk of surgery.

Exercise is also important. It really does not help you lose much weight but does help you maintain the weight loss. I encourage a varied program of cardiovascular exercise, strength training, and stretching. You should do this at least five days a week. You will feel better, sleep better, have more energy, and live longer if you exercise.

Finally, be open to discussing your weight with me. My job is to work with you to get you healthier. If you are overweight, losing a few pounds is the best place to start..