



THE EXTRA WEIGHT OF COVID-19

If you're anything like me, you have gained a few extra kilos during this pandemic. About two months ago, I stood in front of the mirror and thought, what the hell! Where did this muffin top come from? The fact that I'm at the end of my 'happy hormone' life has made it even harder to manage my weight. If you are reading this and thinking of your equivalent of a 'muffin top', you are not alone. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed us inside and out. For many people, the outward changes weren't especially welcome.

Pandemic weight gain

According to a recent well-being survey conducted by the CSIRO, around 40% of adult Australians felt they had gained weight over the pandemic, slightly higher than the global average.¹ This is concerning given 63% of Australian adults are either overweight or obese.² Higher rates of men are overweight than women, while the same proportion of men and women are obese.² To add insult to injury, there is also a growing body of evidence that has identified obesity as a risk factor for more severe COVID-19 illness and death.³ Getting on top of that ever-expanding girth is therefore crucial not only for our health and well-being, but in the context of the pandemic.

Disruption of routines

Changes in our weight have occurred with good reason. Our diet and eating habits, activity levels, sleep habits and daily routines have been turned upside down by the pandemic. The stress, isolation, and challenges of making life work have necessitated changes in our behaviour over the past year. Not only have adults experienced weight gain, but kids have too. Sitting in front of screens, poor sleep routines and stress-related hunger cravings for snacks and comfort foods. Two hours or less of screen time per day are recommended for

children at risk of overweight and obesity.⁴ However, it has been hard to deal with this number when they are on screens for over seven or eight hours during virtual schooling.

The toll of weight stigma

Weight gain is about so much more than a number on the scale. Researchers in the space have shown tremendous guilt and shame associated with obesity, and psychologists are working to help patients realise that weight gain is a normal reaction to an abnormal circumstance.⁴ It is not a character flaw. So many of our coping strategies have been unavailable to us this year. Still, weight stigma runs deep, and we often see memes and jokes about COVID-19 weight gain that are really insensitive to the eating behaviour challenges people are dealing with.

Behaviour changes for weight loss

So, what can we do to get our weight heading in the right direction? To levels that are good for our physical, emotional and mental health. Self-compassion is step number one. Developing healthy habits is step number two. If we look to the obesity experts and their behaviour change research, here are some of the things that we can do to get ourselves back on track.⁴

1. **Start with modest goals that are realistic and sustainable.** Do you currently have a habit of eating dessert most nights of the week? Don't go cold turkey; instead, set yourself a goal of having dessert three times a week and slowly reduce this to once a week on a Saturday night, perhaps. Is there anything else that you can reduce in your diet to get it on track? Perhaps it is putting one less sugar in your coffee or replacing a high sugar snack with a piece of fruit. As we tick off each success, we start building confidence, and our motivation kicks in. Every small change has a positive effect on our health. A 5% weight loss can make a massive difference in improving blood pressure, blood sugar and other weight-related problems.⁵
2. **Establish new routines.** To re-establish healthy habits, we have to create new routines. Be proactive and deliberate when planning out your schedule. What exercise will you do each day, and for how long? What time are you going to go to bed at night, and what time are you going to wake up? We know that sleep is one of our superpowers, and consistency one of the most important predictors of good sleep quality. Routines can help us get back to the healthy basics in terms of eating habits, physical activity, sleep and self-care.
3. **Create an environment for success.** If your pantry is filled with junk food, it is going to be nearly impossible to resist. Removing all processed food and lollies from the kitchen and replacing them with healthy snacks that are prepped and ready to go will set you up for success when hunger strikes. Changing your home environment is really low hanging fruit, and it lays the foundation for making healthy choices right from the start.
4. **Track yourself.** Research has shown the more we monitor our behaviours, the more weight we will lose over time. This monitoring can be a handwritten paper log or digital apps to help track your food intake and physical activity. My favourite app is

MyFitnessPal which tracks everything from food (using barcodes), physical activity and hydration. It also provides current information on health and well-being, including recipes for healthier meals and snacks. There are stacks of evidence showing that frequent self-monitoring is not only associated with better weight loss but helps maintain the weight loss over time.⁶

5. **Emphasise health, not weight.** Don't make it all about the number on the scale. Weighing yourself daily is not encouraged as healthy and sustainable weight loss occurs on a gradual basis. Focusing on your nutrition, physical activity, sleep habits and screen time can remove some of the stigma away from talking about extra kilos or body mass index. Pay attention to improving your health regardless of the number on the scale. Focus on how you are feeling in your body and your increasing energy levels.
6. **Make it a family affair.** Everyone in the family can get involved. Set family goals like increasing the amount of healthy food you eat, being more active, decreasing sugary drinks and having less screen time. If you have children, let them have a say in what you buy for the pantry. Walk together at the start or end of the day. Sit down for dinner and connect. And if you live on your own, you could go for a walk and call a family member or friend on the phone while walking. Perhaps get an accountability buddy who will regularly check in with you to ensure that you are working towards your goals. Who knows, you may even motivate them to focus on their well-being too.

Making sure we focus on our physical, emotional and mental health is now more important than ever. This pandemic is not going away in the short to medium term. We are going to continue to experience lockdowns and disruption to our daily routines at least for this year. So why not draw a line in the sand and make a deliberate choice to focus on your health. And if that muffin top is one of the things you want to lose, then let's get started. Remember, it takes one small step at a time.

References:

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