

The Health at Every Size Approach

Moving Ahead in Health

It's time to take a new approach to wellness and wholeness. Time to focus on promoting healthy, happy lifestyles for both children and adults. This is an urgent challenge for countries around the world. The traditional ways of dealing with weight through a dieting mentality and food restriction have not worked and are causing much harm.

The Health at Every Size paradigm comes as a refreshing shift that focuses on total health and well-being, rather than weight. It's a health-centered, compassionate approach that leaves restrictive thinking behind and promotes health in body, mind and spirit for people of every size.

With roots in Health Canada's Vitality program, this approach focuses on living actively, eating well and feeling good about oneself and others.

A paradigm shift

The Health at Every Size approach, also known as *Health at Any Size*, asks: How can this individual be healthier at the size he or she is now? How can we prevent weight and eating problems for this child and every child?

After our long history of diets that don't work, pressures to be thin, and the crisis in eating disorders, the response is everywhere positive to this approach. Health at Every Size advocates reject the false notion that thin people are healthy and large people unhealthy.



The new approach recognizes that the body cannot be shaped at will. It celebrates diversity as a positive characteristic of the human race, and reassures parents that, of course, children can be healthy at their natural sizes.

It recognizes that problems of overweight, eating disorders, dysfunctional eating, size prejudice, hazardous weight loss, and the widespread undernutrition of girls and women are all inter-related. All are intensified by our weight-obsessed world, and need to be addressed together in a comprehensive way to avoid doing harm. This new approach is the way to prevent weight and eating problems and heal the damage done.

Health at Every Size concepts embrace the following:

- * Accept and respect one's own and others' unique traits and talents; celebrate diversity.
- * Healthy lifestyle is achievable for everyone, unlike so-called "ideal weight."
- * Enjoy physical activity every day, in one's own way, as natural and beneficial.
- * Enjoy eating well; rediscover normal eating — tune in to hunger, appetite and fullness.

Tenets of Health at Every Size

- **Size and self-acceptance** — respect and appreciation for the wonderful diversity of body shapes and sizes (including one's own!), rather than the pursuit of an idealized weight or shape.
- **Health Enhancement** — attention to emotional, physical, and spiritual well being, without focus on weight loss or achieving a specific "ideal weight."
- **The pleasure of eating well** — eating based on internal cues of hunger, satiety, and appetite, and individual nutritional needs, rather than external food plans or diets.
- **The joy of movement** — encouraging all physical activities for the associated pleasure and health benefits, rather than following a specific routine of regimented exercise for the primary purpose of weight loss.
- **An end to weight bias** — recognition that body shape, size and/or weight are not evidence of any particular way of eating, level of physical activity, personality, psychological issue, or moral character; confirmation that there is beauty and worth in EVERY body.

by Karin Kratina, PhD, RD and Ellen Shuman. Adapted from Moving Away From Diets (2003), with input from the think tank Show Me The Data

Beauty, health and strength come in all sizes. This truth is affirmed by Health at Every Size, a health-centered approach that focuses on health and well being, not weight.

It's about wellness and wholeness, eating in normal, healthy ways and living actively. It's about acceptance, self-respect and appreciation of diversity. It's health at any size. Everyone qualifies! -

—Children and Teens Afraid to Eat, 2001

- * Enjoy full nutrition, without dieting; honor balance and variety; all foods can fit.
- * Focus on wellness in body, mind and spirit; focus on children's overall health and well-being.

Positive programs

Research confirms the wisdom of the Health at Every Size approach. A recent two-year study tested 78 obese women, defined as chronic dieters, at the University of California, Davis. Half comprised the Health at Every Size group; the other half entered a traditional dieting program (*JAmDietAs*. 2005;105:929-936).

Women in the first group learned to recognize and follow internal hunger cues, and feel better about their size and shape. Over the two years they improved in metabolic fitness measures (blood pressure, blood lipids), in energy expenditure, eating behavior (restraint, eating disorder pathology), and psychology (self-esteem, depression, body image), and maintained a stable weight. They sustained all benefits and 92 percent stayed in the program until the end.

By contrast, during the first year women in the dieting group lost weight and improved in many health measures, but in typical yo-yo fashion, the second year they regained the weight and lost their hard-won health benefits. Almost half (42 percent) dropped out.

Combating misinformation

The Health at Every Size movement also takes on the misinformation being spread in the “war on obesity,” such as the exaggeration of related health risks.

Katherine M. Flegal, PhD, Senior Research Scientist at the National Center for Health Statistics, CDC, explains, “Although people think there's all this evidence out there showing a high mortality risk associated with overweight, in fact the literature doesn't show it.” Flegal's 2005 research reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (2005;293:1861-1867) corrected an earlier CDC report of severe risks related to over-

weight, and instead shows that being ‘overweight’ is associated with a *lower risk of death* than being ‘normal weight.’

Further, despite nearly three decades of intense research, the experts fail to show success for any of the current weight loss methods, whether diet, drugs or surgery. All must be considered experimental. None are proven safe and effective.

Dieting causes short-term weight loss lasting no longer than six months, followed by regain, known as weight cycling, which carries its own risks, and can lead to food preoccupation, bingeing, dysfunctional eating and sometimes eating disorders. *Drugs* offer only minimal weight loss of about 5-11 pounds, regained when the drug is stopped, so must be taken long term with increased risk; of 6 million U.S. adults treated with fen-phen/Redux, the FDA reports that one-third developed leaky heart valves, fatal to some; others died of primary pulmonary disease. *Gastric surgery* for weight loss carries risk of nearly 5 percent death rate (nearly 50 percent for patients age 75 and over; *JAMA*. 2005;294:1903-1908), and more than 60 complications.

The 1990 Congressional hearings exposed a great deal of deception and fraud in the weight loss industry. In 1992 the National Institutes of Health reported not one company could produce research showing safety and success for any program.

In their 1998 New Year's Day editorial, Marcia Angell, MD, and Jerome P. Kassirer, MD, editors of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, warned, “Until we have better data about the risks of being overweight and the benefits and risks of trying to lose weight, we should remember that the cure for obesity may be worse than the condition.”

Today there is overwhelming agreement among health professionals and the public about the failure of weight loss programs to bring about lasting change. There is widespread concern for the harm they cause.

“Healthy bodies come in all shapes,” says Steven Blair, PhD, Senior Scientific Editor of the *Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity and Health*. “We need to stop hounding people about their weight and encourage them to eat a healthful diet and exercise.”

Sally Smith, Director of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance agrees: “Provide quality health care, not weight cycling.”

Freedom to get on with life

The Health at Every Size approach frees people to take pleasure in food again, to enjoy activity without the goal of calorie burn. It frees children from struggling to fit unrealistic size expectations, and parents from the confusion of conflicting advice. It frees girls and women who have kept themselves thin but limited, by restricting food, so they can live in fulfilling ways again. It frees large children to get on with what is important in their lives. Through this approach, people of all sizes are moving on to a more enriching life of wellness in its many dimensions.