



Trans Care

Medical issues

Fit or Fatphobic? Trans people, weight and health

Many trans people struggle around body image. There are very strong societal messages about what “real” men and “real” women should look like, and this affects trans people’s feelings about femininity/masculinity, attractiveness, and self-esteem.

Societal norms include values relating to weight and body shape. *Fatphobia* is like transphobia: it involves disrespect, disgust, and mistreatment of people who don’t fit cultural norms about thinness. People who are perceived as overweight or fat are often assumed to be lazy, greedy, ignorant, stupid, unhealthy, and asexual, and as a result are subjected to harassment and discrimination.

Weight does have an impact on health. For example, maintaining bone density as you age depends on having a high enough weight (see *Trans people and osteoporosis*). Conversely, there are increased risks of arthritis if too much weight is put on the joints (knees, ankles, etc.) over a long period of time. But much of the information written about weight and health is fatphobic, reinforcing societal stigma about weight.

Health information that focuses on losing weight or an ideal weight range is missing the point. Weight doesn't necessarily relate to a healthy level of exercise and a good diet. People who are heavy can be physically active, eat well, and be in good health. Thin people can be unfit or compulsively exercise, eat a lot of junk food, struggle with anorexia/ bulimia, or otherwise have health problems. Having a weight that conforms with societal norms does not mean balance in other areas of your life, nor does being heavy necessarily mean that you are unhealthy.

What *is* important?

No matter what your weight is, physical activity and healthy eating are important. Keep it simple by considering three principles suggested by the Canadian Cancer Society: balance, moderation, and variety.

Balance

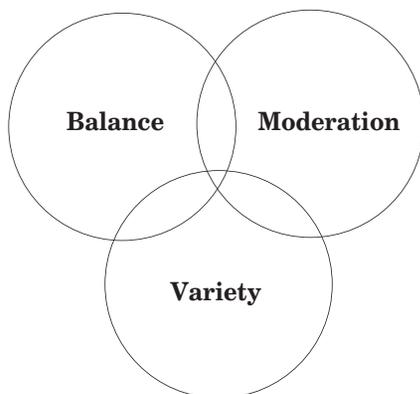
- If you listen, your body will tell you what it wants and needs.
- Make healthy foods the bulk of your diet, with occasional treats.
- Balance physical activity and rest.
- Balance the time you're spending on exercise/diet with other parts of your life.

Moderation

- Eat when you are hungry.
- Eat moderate amounts.
- Avoid binge eating or starvation diets.
- Aim for 30 minutes of moderate-intensity activity every day.

Variety

- Do activities that move and stretch your body in different ways.
- Exercise outside when you can, to enjoy the diversity of nature.
- Eat a variety of fruits, vegetables, grains, and other non-processed foods.



When to get help

1. If you are struggling with fatphobia

As with any kind of systemic oppression, people who are perceived as overweight or fat are subjected to ridicule, harassment, and discrimination. The fat liberation movement is challenging media stereotypes, Peer and professional support can be useful in:

- improving your body image and self-acceptance
- dealing with stigma, shame, and internalized fatphobia
- dealing with the stress of living in a fatphobic society

size esteem: feeling acceptance of, respect for, and pride in one's body, whatever its size or shape.

– Richard Stimson

2. If you are struggling with disordered eating or compulsive exercising

Professional help may be needed if you are constantly thinking about your weight, compulsively dieting or exercising, or stressed about how your body looks. Studies of trans people with body image disorders found that MTFs typically suffered more from anorexia, bulimia, or other eating disorders, while FTMs tended to compulsively or excessively exercise in an attempt to be more muscular or to hide their hips/chest.

Some trans people compulsively eat or exercise to cope with the stress of being trans in a transphobic world. It can be challenging to redefine a healthy relationship to eating and exercise, and to find other ways to cope with stress. Peer and professional support can be useful to regain balance.

3. If you are experiencing rapid weight loss or gain

A rapid increase or decrease in weight can be a symptom of serious illness. Talk with a medical professional.

4. If transphobia or fatphobia is making it difficult for you to be physically active

There are barriers that make it hard for trans people to be physically active. Many trans people feel intimidated by having to use gender-specific change rooms, don't feel comfortable (or aren't welcome) in sports teams that are for women or for men, and don't have money to pay gym

or sports team fees. Even something as seemingly simple as walking for exercise can be intimidating for trans people who get stared at, laughed at, or harassed when they go out in public. Anxiety about going out in public or having to use a public bathroom can become overwhelming and make it difficult for trans people to spend time away from home.

Fatphobia can also make it hard to be physically active. It can be hard to find clothes or equipment that fits your body. Fat people often get stared at, laughed at, or harassed, particularly when exercising. The booklet *Active at Any Size* (<http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/active.htm>) is a size-positive resource to help large people deal with barriers to physical activity.

For some people, peer or professional counselling helps figure out what the barriers are and ways to reduce or overcome them. For example, if you find it stressful to exercise in public, building in more physical activity as a part of regular day-to-day activities (rather than having a set time to exercise) can be useful, as can exercising with a friend who can help you keep a sense of humour and deal with stares or rude comments.

Size-positive health care

Health professionals can, like anyone else, be fatphobic, or “sizeist.” Consider finding a new source of help if your care provider is:

- overly focused on your weight, rather than your overall health
- using scare tactics to pressure you to lose weight, instead of talking in a balanced way about weight and health
- assuming you don’t exercise or that you eat too much because of your weight
- assuming that you don’t need information about exercise or diet because of your weight

Many of the strategies used to find a trans-positive health provider (see the booklet *Getting trans-competent care*, available from the Transgender Health Program) can also be used to find a health provider who is size-positive. A size-positive health care provider will:

- focus on all aspects of your health, not just your weight
- help you explore ways to enjoy physical activity for fun and fitness, rather than weight loss

- answer any questions you have about nutrition, without suggesting that you diet
- answer any questions you have about weight and health

For more information about size-positive trans-friendly resources, *NoLose* explicitly welcomes trans people of all genders and seeks to be trans-inclusive in its events: <http://www.nolose.org>

Questions? Contact the Transgender Health Program:

Office: #301-1290 Hornby Street, Vancouver, BC V6Z 1W2

Phone/TTY/TDD: 604-734-1514 or 1-866-999-1514 (toll-free in BC)

Email: transhealth@vch.ca

Web: <http://www.vch.ca/transhealth>

The Transgender Health Program is an anonymous and confidential free service for anyone in BC who has a trans health question or concern. Services for trans people and loved ones include:

- information about trans advocacy, medical care, hormones, speech change, and surgery
- help finding health/social services, and help navigating the trans health system
- non-judgmental peer counselling and support
- information about trans community organizations and peer support groups



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For more copies, email the Transgender Health Program at trans.health@vch.ca or call/TTY 1-866-999-1514 (toll-free in BC) and quote Catalogue No. GA.100.F55.