



## Weight changes

Coping with weight changes that occur as your body moves to a healthier weight range can be challenging. Common concerns often include:

- anxiety about the nature of the weight gain (fat stores versus muscle tissue)
- how much to eat
- fear about continuing weight gain
- feeling physically uncomfortable from being 'over-full' or bloated

### The nature of gaining weight

Weight change occurs within the following body 'compartments':

- glycogen in muscles and liver (carbohydrate storage)
- lean tissue or muscle (protein storage)
- body lipids (fat storage)
- fluid

Once re-nourishment starts, stores of glycogen and some fluid are replenished. Over time, as your nutritional intake continues to improve, both fat and protein levels in the body will increase. The gain in weight will come from muscle and body tissues, as well as fat stores, which is important for normal hormone levels, protection of body organs and keeping warm.

### Gaining weight

Weight will fluctuate, both while gaining and stabilising weight. It is normal for body weight to vary daily with changes in:

- hormone levels
- the amount of water in your body
- bowel contents

The rate of weight gain can vary. More rapid weight gain one week is generally followed by a much smaller gain (or sometimes a small weight loss) the next week. This is mainly due to fluid changes. If you have been eating well below your body's energy needs or consuming a low carbohydrate diet, you may experience an initial rapid weight gain. This is caused by:

- glycogen stores being replaced in liver and muscles. Glycogen is stored with water and can cause a gain of 1-2kg or more
- an increase in the contents of your digestive system along with extra fluid

The rate of weight gain will then often slow down. Initial weight gain may also be minimal as metabolism (the rate your body burns energy) can increase very quickly as food intake increases.

### How much should I eat?

When undertaking nutritional rehabilitation, bodies will respond differently. Some bodies rapidly replace lost tissue, thereby restoring body weight quickly. Other bodies may firstly speed up metabolism and undertake internal repair work, so weight restoration may be much slower.

Likewise, some bodies restore appetite signals sooner than others. You may feel very hungry once you start eating more normally. This can be very confronting when you have not experienced hunger for some time. If you are getting hunger signals, it is important to honour them and feed your body as much as it needs. This may

mean eating more than the minimum amount prescribed on your meal plan. Other bodies do not restore signals until much later in the recovery process.

If you find that you are not experiencing hunger, it is important to eat according to your meal plan. Even if your body cannot give you hunger cues yet, it needs nutrition to restore lost tissue and reinstate functions such as appetite cues. Your body will respond in its own unique way during illness and healing.

### **Discomfort and 'feeling fat'**

You may start to feel bloated, full in the stomach or feel 'fat'. This can occur even after eating quite small amounts. There are three main reasons for this discomfort:

- Your stomach empties more slowly following a period of under eating. This means that you feel full more quickly and may stay feeling full for longer.
- With significant weight loss you will lose some of the muscle tone around your body organs. Initially, your stomach may be more rounded than usual after eating. This will resolve with weight gain, part of which will include muscle gain, that will develop over time.
- How you think about food and your body. Anxiety can increase your feeling of fullness or 'fatness' after eating food you think of as 'fattening'. The thought 'I am feeling fat' maybe masking a feeling or emotion underneath e.g. anxiety or another uncomfortable emotion. The extra attention you place on the sensations of digestion can also cause discomfort.

### **Feeling more comfortable**

Steps you can take to help limit the amount of discomfort you experience:

- Choose clothes that are less tight-fitting. Tight clothes will exaggerate even minor changes in weight or shape. Wear loose, comfortable clothing while eating.
- Put away the clothes that no longer fit you – dress for your body, as it is now
- Find distracting or self-soothing activities to do straight after meals. Examples might include talking with a friend or family member, playing a computer game, reading a good book, using a weighted pillow or taking a bath.
- Limit the amount of fluid you drink with your meals or close to mealtimes. Too much liquid can worsen your feelings of fullness.
- Some food choices (such as salads) are more bulky and can worsen the feeling of bloating. Include more energy dense foods to help reduce the total amount of food needed.
- Remind yourself that any increase in body tissue (real weight gain) cannot occur straight after food intake. It takes time to convert any food not used for immediate energy to fuel storage.
- Limit weight checking and shape checking behaviours that reinforce your anxiety and the eating disorder
- Remember to be kind to yourself during this time of change