Regular feature: Diet and Nutrition

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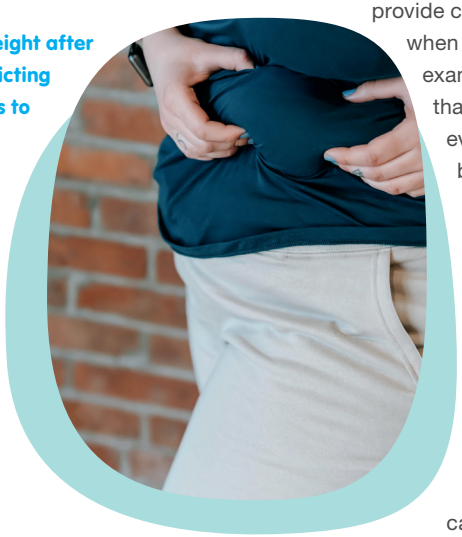
Weight loss for people living with an ileostomy or internal pouch

As a dietitian, I see many patients with an ileostomy or pouch who are looking to lose weight.

Sometimes people gain weight after bowel surgery due to restricting their diet to low fibre foods to prevent complications. Sometimes body image issues can affect our relationship with food and lead to comfort eating. Others can experience a hernia which restricts exercise, and some people were overweight before surgery and want to take care of their body now.



Emotional triggers

The reason for weight gain is very important to understand before we can make a plan. This is because someone who is eating for emotional reasons will struggle to successfully change their diet if those underlying reasons are not addressed. If we think of food as comfort for challenging feelings or situations, and someone feels ashamed of their weight and is given an unrealistic plan from a dietitian or tries to follow a restrictive diet, that will create more discomfort and lead to a stronger desire to comfort eat. We're essentially taking away a crutch that supports us with difficult things.

Sometimes undoing this cycle is as simple as having a conversation about the 'triggers' for overeating, and putting strategies in place to provide comfort in a different way when challenges arise. For example, if someone finds that they're eating a lot in the evenings because they are bored, tired or lonely, taking a nice bath, calling a friend or going to another room to read can distract and break the cycle. In these scenarios, I will ask someone to write a 'menu' of things to do when they notice the trigger to overeat so they can distract themselves and find a new way of getting the comfort they're seeking. Sometimes, this runs too deep for me as a dietitian to manage and I will recommend counselling or psychology. For many people, if we can reduce emotional overeating, we can facilitate weight loss.

Unhealthy restrictions

Other people I see are restricting their diet to less healthy, lower fibre foods which are usually

higher in energy which gets converted into fat stores. It is very easy to overeat on low fibre, hyperpalatable foods like biscuits, cake and crisps which, for many people, feel like 'safe foods' when they're worried about experiencing a blockage. Of course, low fibre diets are necessary for some people, but there are easy swaps to lower calorie options which can make a big difference in losing weight. With people in this situation, I will always work to try and increase their fibre intake where it is safe to do so, as this will help with appetite regulation as well as the nutritional quality of the diet.

Movement is of course a very helpful tool in weight loss. If someone's movement is restricted due to a hernia or other health problems, weight loss becomes more difficult. In this situation it is helpful to know that diet is the cornerstone of weight loss, so we can still lose weight even if movement is limited. That said, I would always encourage my patients to seek out information from exercise specialists like **IA** Journal contributor Sarah Russell, who can advise on safe exercise when you live with a hernia, which will support weight loss efforts.

Post-op complications

One very difficult situation is when post-operative weight gain leads to a hernia, which then needs repair but can't be done until some weight has been lost. This often combines all the factors above with emotional eating, due to the pressure to lose weight as well as restricted exercise and fibre owing to the hernia. In these cases, I will work on all three factors and with the right support, steady weight loss can be achieved but patience is key.

Fast-track measures

On the market now, we have many weight loss supplements and medications which can seem like an easy fix.

The most talked about weight loss tool is of course GLP-1 injections like Ozempic and Mounjaro. These work by reducing your appetite and slowing the movement of stools through your bowel so that you feel fuller for longer. These can be a life-changing option and I am seeing more and more stoma and pouch patients using them.

If you are considering using a GLP-1 medication and live with a pouch or ileostomy, it is very important to get sign-off for this from your GP or consultant before you start. This is because they can cause gallstones and pancreatitis in a small number of people, and you may already be at risk of these conditions. If you are using loperamide, you'll need to reduce the dose and if you are using them to prepare for surgery, keeping a high protein diet and maintaining strength-bearing exercise is important to ensure the surgery is successful. When the protein and exercise is reduced too much, we are at risk of poor wound healing and complications like pneumonia and other infections. Working with a dietitian is key to keep you safe and well on GLP-1 medications, especially when you live with other health conditions.

Meal replacement shakes are also very popular right now. These can be a useful tool, but we must remember that these are 'ultra processed foods' which means they can be helpful for weight loss but not great for our overall health. They also pass very quickly through the gut, especially when you don't have a colon, and this means you can feel very hungry and struggle to stick to just the drinks. Again, appropriate supervision and support is advised.

Full fibre

We are seeing a lot of fibre supplements for weight loss, which can be helpful for some people. This is liquid fibre, so is unlikely to cause blockages to a pouch or ileostomy but it can create looser output or stools. The benefit of fibre drinks is that they can keep you fuller for longer but any other claims that the product is making won't be evidence based. If you want to experiment with a fibre supplement for weight loss, start with small amounts and see how your body responds. They can be a useful 'afternoon snack' for some people.

Any restrictive diets like 'keto' or 'carnivore' diets may lead to short-term results, but restricting your diet this heavily is not sustainable for most people and almost always leads to worse health outcomes and weight regain, so avoid anything that encourages excessive restriction. Instead look for healthy swaps and make one small change each week.

Laxatives in disguise

Lastly, we are seeing many other weight loss supplements coming onto the market making huge claims. I never recommend any weight loss supplements as there is no evidence for any benefits and many of them are just laxatives disguised as other things. This could make them dangerous for anyone with a pouch or ileostomy. There are no weight loss supplements available that have strong evidence for being effective – if there were, the NHS would be prescribing them! Please avoid any weight loss teas, capsules, patches or powders as these are ineffective and potentially unsafe.

Overall, the world of weight loss is complex but the most important place to start is to understand why weight gain has happened and tackle the root cause. Beating yourself up and going on restrictive diets that are unsustainable will only lead to failure and further lower your self-esteem. Seek professional support and make small sustainable goals rather than aiming for a complete diet overhaul.

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