



Gaining Weight the Healthy Way

According to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute criteria, a body mass index (BMI) of less than 18.5 is considered underweight. See the [BMI Calculator](http://www.mckinley.illinois.edu/interactive/bmi_calculator.htm) on the McKinley web site (http://www.mckinley.illinois.edu/interactive/bmi_calculator.htm) to determine your BMI. Significant underweight is associated with negative health effects including loss of menstrual function, complications with pregnancy, complications with surgery, and slow recovery after illness.

Some individuals want to gain weight or muscle mass even if they are not underweight. Athletes may want to increase muscle mass to help them perform their sport better. No matter what the reason for wanting to gain weight, taking steps to gain weight healthfully is recommended.

A sound weight gain program combines exercise to boost muscle development along with a balanced diet to provide nutrients for energy and muscle growth. The addition of 250-500 extra calories per day will cause a weight gain of approximately 0.5-1 pound per week. This number may vary because of activity level and genetic makeup.

What is a balanced diet?

Consuming more calories than you expend will cause weight gain, no matter what type of food you eat. However, you will be more nutritionally sound if you get most of those calories from the following groups: grains, fruits, vegetables, dairy or non-dairy substitutes, meat and/or plant proteins.

What's the best way to increase calories?

Expensive, specialized weight gain formulas are usually unnecessary for most healthy persons. Extra calories can easily be consumed through food. To avoid feeling stuffed, make small additions of food to your normal diet. Those extra calories will add up! Here are some ideas to get you started.

- Add powdered skim milk to beverages and soups to add calories and protein.
- Drink higher calorie beverages such as milk, juice, and sports drinks in addition to water.
- Snack on nuts or dried fruit. You can also add them to your salads and cereal.
- Add ground flaxseed to salad, cereal, and smoothies.
- Add grated cheese or sour cream to soups and salads.
- Add slices of cheese to sandwiches.
- Eat higher calorie foods, or eat smaller meals and snacks more often.

The following foods can help you boost your calorie intake:

- **Grains:** heavy, thick breads like whole wheat or pumpernickel, dense cereals such as grape nuts, granola, and raisin bran, bran muffins, bagels, wheat germ and flaxseed (add to yogurt or cereal)
- **Fruit:** bananas, pineapple, raisins and other dried fruit, fruit juices, avocados
- **Vegetables:** peas, corn, potatoes, winter squash
- **Dairy:** cheese, ice cream, frozen yogurt; add instant breakfast or powdered milk to low fat milk or yogurt
- **Meat/Plant proteins:** peanut butter and other nut butters, nuts and seeds, hummus
- **Other foods:** any kind of instant breakfast or meal replacement drinks, honey, guacamole

Snack ideas

- Make a smoothie by combining 1 cup fruit (such as bananas or berries), 1 cup vanilla frozen yogurt, ½ cup milk, ¼ cup juice, and 1 tablespoon ground flaxseed. Puree in a blender until smooth.
- Make a trail mix of ¼ cup nuts, ¼ cup raisins, and ½ cup granola
- Make mini pizzas: toast a bagel or English muffin, spread each half with tomato sauce, and top with mozzarella cheese. Microwave 20-30 seconds until cheese melts.

Strength Training for Weight Gain

Strength training is the best way to add lean muscle tissue to your frame. A balanced program should include exercises for all the major muscle groups: chest, back, abdominals, biceps, triceps, shoulders, quadriceps and hamstrings. Example exercises include: bench press, seated rows, crunches, bicep curls, overhead tricep extensions, leg press and leg curls.

Your program should include at least one exercise for each of these muscle groups. Depending on what your goals are, you can increase the number of exercises for a particular muscle group to 2-3.

You should work up to doing 2-3 sets of 4-8 repetitions of each exercise in your program. Once you can easily complete 8 repetitions in each set, increase the amount of weight you lift.

Don't cut out cardiovascular exercise altogether when trying to gain weight. Try to get 2-3 workouts in each week, but you can keep them short, 20-30 minutes, and of a moderate intensity.

Note: Gaining weight is easier for people with certain body types. Realize you may be limited to some extent by your genes. You may not be able to look like a body builder, but eating extra calories and working out will help you grow stronger and become more fit. Appreciate the body you have and care for yourself as well as you can.

References:

Clark, Nancy. "Bulking Up: Helping Clients Gain Weight Healthfully." *ACSM's Health & Fitness Journal* 9.5 (Sept/Oct 2005): 15-19.

Zeratsky, K. "Underweight? See how to add pounds healthfully." *Nutrition and Healthy Eating: Expert Answers*. Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. 27 Aug 2009. <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/underweight/AN00597>

"Strength training: Get stronger, leaner and healthier." *Fitness: In Depth*. Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. 4 July 2008. <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/strength-training/HQ01710>

If you are a registered University of Illinois student and you have questions or concerns, or need to make an appointment, please call: **Dial-A-Nurse at 333-2700**

If you are concerned about any difference in your treatment plan and the information in this handout, you are advised to contact your health care provider.

Visit the McKinley Health Center Web site at: <http://www.mckinley.illinois.edu>