

9 Reasons You May Be Gaining Weight Unintentionally

You may gain weight unintentionally as a result of certain things you consume, such as sugary foods and beverages. But sometimes weight gain can occur due to an underlying health condition.

Weight gain can be frustrating, especially when you don't know what's causing it. While diet typically plays the largest role in weight gain, other factors like stress, lack of sleep, and taking certain medications may also contribute. Here are 9 causes of unintentional weight gain.

1. You eat too many highly processed foods

Highly processed foods are typically packed with calories yet devoid of essential nutrients, such as protein and fiber, which keep you feeling full. Foods like sugary cereals, fast food, and microwave dinners also contain a slew of harmful ingredients, such as: added sugars, preservatives, and unhealthy fats.

Numerous studies link highly processed food to weight gain and rising obesity rates in the United States and around the world. For example, a 2019 study in 19,363 Canadian adults found that those who ate the most ultra-processed foods were 32% more likely to have obesity than those who ate the least.

Another small study found that participants ate about 500 more calories per day on an ultra-processed diet than on an unprocessed diet. Eating more calories than you burn in a day is associated with weight gain. To avoid unintentional weight gain, try cutting out processed meals and snacks and instead focusing on whole foods.

2. You eat too much sugar

Regularly consuming sugary foods and beverages may lead to weight gain and increase your risk of chronic health conditions, such as diabetes. Some foods high in added sugars include: candy, cakes, soda, sports drinks, ice cream, iced tea, and sweetened coffee drinks.

In particular, sugary beverages are the largest source of added sugar in the United States and are strongly associated with weight gain.

3. You have a sedentary lifestyle

Inactivity is a common contributor to weight gain and chronic diseases. Working a desk job, watching TV, driving, and using a computer or phone are all sedentary activities. A 2018 study in 464 people with obesity and excess weight found their average daily sitting time was 6.2 hours on working days and 6 hours on non-working days. Work-related tasks were the largest contributor, followed by watching TV.

Making a few lifestyle changes, such as exercising and sitting less, can make a big difference.

- Some ways to help increase your level of physical activity during the day include:
- Taking a walk after dinner instead of watching TV
- working out or walking during your lunch break
- Investing in a standing or treadmill
- desk riding your bike to work
- aiming to walk 10,000 steps each day

4. You engage in yo-yo dieting

Yo-yo dieting refers to cycles of intentional weight loss followed by unintentional weight regain. This pattern is linked to an increased risk of weight gain over time.

In a 2019 study in 2,785 people, those who had dieted within the previous year had greater body weights and waist circumferences than those of non-dieters.

To manage your weight long-term, try focusing on sustainable lifestyle changes, such as:

- exercising
- cutting out processed and sugary foods
- eating nutrient-dense, whole foods rich in fiber and protein

5. You have an undiagnosed medical issue

Many lifestyle factors contribute to unintentional weight gain, but certain medical conditions may also play a role. These may include:

- hypothyroidism
- depression
- cardiovascular disease
- diabetes
- polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)

Binge eating disorder (BED) may also be responsible for unintentional weight gain. BED is categorized by recurrent episodes of uncontrollable overeating.

6. You don't get enough sleep

Sleep is essential for overall health and well-being, but poor sleep quality may trigger weight gain. A 2022 review found that poor sleep is associated with eating more frequently and eating foods higher in carbohydrates and unhealthy fats – all of which may lead to weight gain.

Similarly, another 2022 review found the following sleep factors affected weight loss:

- short sleep duration
- frequent awakenings during the night
- poor sleep quality
- longer sleep onset

7. You don't eat enough whole foods

Eating a diet high in whole foods is an easy and effective way to promote weight loss and improve many other aspects of your health. In fact, the most important factor in weight loss is choosing whole, minimally processed foods. A 2018 study divided 609 adults with excess weight into groups that followed either a low-fat or low-carb diet for 12 months.

Both groups were instructed to:

- maximize vegetable intake
- restrict intake of added sugars, trans fats, and refined carbohydrates
- eat mostly whole, minimally processed, nutrient-dense foods
- prepare most meals at home

8. You're stressed out

Chronic stress is a common problem that can affect your weight. High levels of the stress hormone cortisol have been shown to increase hunger and your desire for highly palatable, calorie-dense foods, which can cause weight gain.

Interestingly, stress management may promote weight loss. In an 8-week study in 45 adults with obesity, those who engaged in relaxation techniques like deep breathing lost significantly more weight than those who only received standard dietary advice.

9. You eat too many calories

Overeating remains a prominent cause of weight gain.

If you take in more calories than you burn per day, you'll likely gain weight.

Mindless eating, frequent snacking, and making calorie-rich, nutrient-poor dietary choices all promote excessive calorie intake.

- Some ways to help avoid overeating include:
- paying attention to hunger and fullness cues by eating mindfully
- following a high fiber, high protein diet rich in plant foods
- drinking water instead of calorie-rich beverages
- increasing your activity level

Why am I suddenly gaining weight?

Some causes of unintentional weight gain include underlying health conditions, being stressed, eating more highly processed foods, and not exercising.

How much unexplained weight gain is concerning?

The American Heart Association recommends getting medical attention if you gain 2 to 3 lbs in a day or 5 lbs in a week. This may be a sign of heart failure.

Why am I gaining weight when I don't eat much?

Even if you don't eat much, a sedentary lifestyle may still cause weight gain if you consume more calories than you burn. Stress, taking certain medications, and having an underlying health condition may also cause weight gain.