

Unintentional weight loss

Sudden, noticeable weight loss can happen after a stressful event. But it can also be a sign of a serious illness.

Stress

It's normal to lose weight after the stress of changing jobs, divorce, redundancy or [bereavement](#).

Your weight often returns to normal when you start to feel better. You may need time to grieve or get used to the change. You can get counselling and support to help with this.

Eating disorder

A big weight loss can be the result of an [eating disorder](#), such as [anorexia](#) or [bulimia](#).

If you think you have an eating disorder, talk to someone you trust and think about contacting your GP.

[Bodywhys](#) provides information and support about eating disorders.

Contact your GP if:

- you do not know the cause of your weight loss or
- you did not lose the weight through dieting or exercising.

You may have an illness that needs treatment.

When weight loss is a concern

Your body weight can change often. But the continued, unintentional loss of more than 5% of your weight over 6 to 12 months is often a cause for concern.

Losing this much weight can be a sign of malnutrition. This is where a person's diet does not have the right amount of nutrients.

Contact your GP if you have other symptoms, such as:

- tiredness
- loss of appetite
- a change in your toilet habits
- an increase in illnesses or infections

Causes of unexpected weight loss

Unintentional weight loss does not always have an underlying cause, such as a stressful event or eating disorder.

But other common causes include:

- [depression](#)
- [hyperthyroidism](#) (an overactive thyroid gland) or over-treating an [underactive thyroid](#)
- cancer

Less common causes of unexpected weight loss

Less often, unexpected weight loss may be the result of:

- the side effects of certain medications
- drug misuse or [alcohol misuse](#)
- heart, kidney, lung or liver disease
- a problem with the glands that secrete hormones – such as Addison's disease or undiagnosed [diabetes](#)
- a long-term inflammatory condition, such as rheumatoid arthritis or lupus
- dental problems – such as losing teeth, having new orthodontics (such as braces) or mouth ulcers
- a condition that causes dysphagia (swallowing problems)
- a problem with the gut, such as a stomach ulcer, Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis or coeliac disease
- a bacterial, viral or parasitic infection, such as tuberculosis (TB), HIV and AIDS, or persistent [gastroenteritis](#)
- dementia, people with dementia may be unable to tell you their eating needs

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