



Pick Your Path to Health

Check it Out: Questions to Ask Before You Join a Weight Loss Program

Lose It or Lose It

Let's get straight to the facts. The leading causes of death for African American women are heart disease and cancer, and losing weight may help to prevent you from developing these life-threatening conditions. It is certainly a step you can take toward being healthier.

Ready?

Make no mistake about it. Losing weight is not easy. Whether it is five pounds or 50 pounds, your body was designed to survive and losing weight takes time and consistency. You may wonder, why is it I can eat half of a cheesecake in one night and gain three pounds by morning, but it takes me a week or two to lose those three pounds? Your body is meant for survival. It stores what it doesn't use (excess calories) for the "just in case" scenario. Your body is ingeniously designed, but you may not be too impressed by its genius when you are trying to lose weight. However, with time, consistency and hard work, you can achieve your weight loss goals.

How to Get Started

Arla Perry of Washington, D.C. attends a supervised weight loss program through a local hospital. It is convenient for her and easy to get to. She gets her blood tested every two weeks, an EKG done once a month and goes in once a week to weigh in and talk to a doctor. "It was appealing because food decisions are made for me. I don't like behavior modification, which is okay for some people, but not me. I wanted to focus on diet and health support rather than emotional support."

Now that you've decided to lose weight, you have many (maybe way too many) options on how to do it. If you're thinking about a weight loss program, the first thing to consider is whether you need one. Not everyone wants or needs a structured program to lose weight. You may want to try losing weight on your own, in which case there are many excellent resources (listed below). You may consider pairing up with a friend or family member to start a nutrition and exercise program. Remember losing weight and exercise go hand in hand (unless you have some sort of

medical condition that prevents it, in which case you should see your physician before starting any weight program).

What's the Right Program?

If you decide you'd like a structured weight loss program, here are some key components to consider when reviewing the many, many options that are out there. Ilse O'Brien, Registered Dietitian and Nutritionist and Diabetes Education Specialist in Virginia advises you to ask the program (and yourself) the following questions before joining:

- Who are its staff? Look at credentials. Are there qualified physicians, nutritionists, dietitians, psychologists, or exercise physiologists?
- How long have they been in business? How many clients do they have?
- How many people successfully complete their program? Get references and speak to clients.
- What does their program emphasize? Avoid extreme diets-avoid any program that eliminates any food group entirely. Any program that eliminates food variety is not good. If there are gadgets or gimmicks to use, run out of the door.
- What is the weight loss rate? Look for a plan that gives you slow weight loss. One pound a week is good. You get a rebound effect if you lose weight too quickly.
- Does it promote eating a variety of fruits, vegetables and proteins? Stay away if it doesn't.
- Can you have your favorite foods? If you can't-avoid it. You won't stick to a program where you can't eat what you like.
- What are the costs? Are there extra fees for supplements or other items? They shouldn't be mandatory. If you're eating well, supplementation shouldn't be a problem. If it's too costly for your budget, don't do it. You shouldn't have to take out a loan to lose weight.
- Do you have a role in setting your weight loss goal? You should have a primary role and your food likes and dislikes and lifestyle should be taken into consideration.
- Is it convenient for you? Can you get there in less than half an hour? Are the hours of business good for you? You won't go if they aren't.
- Does it have a behavior component? A good program should offer a behavior component (whether you use it or not) that considers how you handle food and how to make behavior changes related to food.

For some women such as Arla, weight loss is not only desirable, but it is necessary. Arla has diabetes and also recently was diagnosed with Hepatitis C. She was advised that losing weight might help her be better able to cope with treatments for her conditions. "It was my decision, not the doctors," she explains. Being overweight most of her life, Arla has tried many diets and weight loss programs over the years. "On most of the other programs I would lose weight and gain it back. I have a difficult time losing weight and may need to do this for the rest of my life," she says. She has now been on this structured program through the hospital for almost a year. "For the first six weeks I was very hungry, but not now. I feel great. It works. I have more energy. I found I could do this (diet) even when I went to Europe."

Arla is in this for the long haul. She is losing weight and feeling better all the time. "I don't have to take diabetes medicine anymore. I wasn't even aware that I felt badly, until I started losing weight and feeling better. You know it's not an all or nothing thing. If you get off the diet or break it...you just go back on."

The biggest question you may want to ask yourself about losing weight is: can you afford not to get on a path to better health?

For more information on the Losing Weight and Weight Loss resources:

National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources, www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity, 301-496-4236

National Women's Health Information Center, Office of Women's Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources, www.4woman.gov, 1-800-994-woman

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, www.cdc.gov, 1-888-232-4674.

National Black Women's Health Project, www.blackwomenshealth.org, 202-543-9311

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or TDD at 1-888-220-5446 or visit the National Women's

Health Information Center at www.4woman.gov or to request weekly health tips by e-mail.