



# Here's to a Lighter HEALTHIER YOU

Smart steps  
to slim down:  
a whole-person  
approach

By Amy Rothenberg ND, DHANP

“I’m sick of being fat,” Sandy told me. At 45 years old, she’d spent a career working as an editor, sitting for long hours in front of her computer, snacking on junk food at her desk, and eating fast food most evenings because she did not care to cook. At 60 pounds overweight, Sandy was morbidly obese and entirely sedentary. She had come to see me for help with fatigue, chronic sinusitis, and weight loss.

### Skyrocketing statistics

Sandy is not alone. The obesity rate in the U.S. has soared to 42% of the adult population, tipping past 40% for the first time in history.<sup>1</sup> This is a 26% increase since 2008. Childhood obesity is also skyrocketing—19% of young people aged 2 through 19 are overweight. If the numbers continue in this direction and at this pace, we have a dire trajectory.

Excess weight predisposes people to a raft of serious diagnoses including type 2 diabetes, hypertension, infertility, stroke,

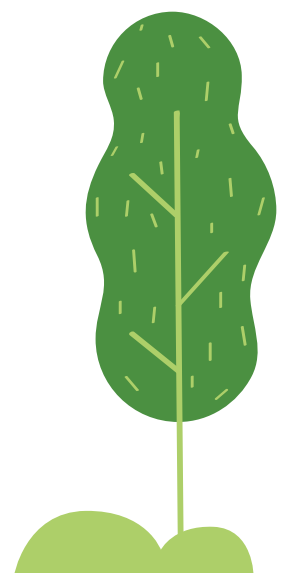


and certain kinds of cancer, as well as problems with mobility and depression. Along with the personal impacts, obesity has a serious financial impact, leading to over 2 billion dollars per year spent nationally on healthcare. In fact, obesity is now a common reason many young adults are deemed physically ineligible to serve in the military.

### Covid complications

More recently, we've learned that being overweight increases your risk of contracting Covid-19—and of having worse outcomes if you do contract the illness.

What's more, the Covid-19 pandemic is intensifying our society's collective weight problems. With stay-at-home orders in place, people have become more sedentary. Add to this mix the ongoing economic, societal, and public health stressors, and people's anxiety levels are through the roof—leading many to turn to “comfort food” (often junk food), as confirmed in



a recent study in the journal *Obesity*.<sup>2</sup> Researchers found that people who were overweight at the start of the pandemic have had even more challenges with weight gain than those who started at a healthy weight.

### Lose it? Not so fast.

In addition to the 42% of U.S. adults classified as obese, another 33% are classified as overweight—which means that more than 70% of adults could stand to lose weight. And as we enter spring and summer, with its promise of time in the sun or by the water, perhaps in a bathing suit or shorts, this is when people are the most motivated to shed extra pounds.

We used to think weight loss was a simple mathematical equation where eating less, plus exercising more, equaled gradual and permanent weight loss. After 35 years of practice as a licensed naturopathic doctor, however, I can tell you that some people just cannot lose weight easily. They may have come to

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it genetically, they may have yo-yo dieted for decades, but the truth remains, they weigh more than they want to, and the extra pounds affect their physical and psychological health and well-being, as was true for my patient Sandy.

We now know that many factors contribute to an individual being overweight—only some of which we can control. As our scientific understanding of genetics, fat metabolism, the physiology of satiety, and the effect of environmental

## TOXINS THAT MAKE US FAT Beware of obesogens

**B**eing overweight or obese sets us up for all manner of chronic health problems, including heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes. Because prevention is always more effective than treatment, we should all be trying to limit our exposures to obesogens—the chemicals and toxins in our environment that may be making us fat, according to recent research.

Not only can these substances contribute to weight gain, they harm our bodies in other ways, such as negatively impacting our microbiomes and reproductive health and increasing our risk for chronic diseases and cancer. Since obesogens are ubiquitous and the list of things to avoid is long, I tend to broach this topic slowly with my patients, with the idea of moving towards these recommendations over time.

Some obesogen exposures are difficult to control and fall better in the realm of environmental action. Consider becoming involved, as your time and resources allow, with organizations that address environmental issues in your community and beyond.<sup>1</sup> The Environmental Working Group is an excellent resource, with a terrific set of consumer guides to help you become further educated on how to avoid some of the obesogens and hormone disruptors mentioned here. [ewg.org/consumer-guides]

### 10 obesogens to avoid

1. Pesticides and herbicides in lawns, farms, gardens. (Golf courses are notorious for overuse, to create pristine grasses.)
2. Cigarette smoke, both first-hand and second-hand.
3. Bisphenol A (BPA) in hard plastics used for food packaging and storage, as well as in baby bottles, plastic wrap, cash register receipts, sports equipment, and more. Try to buy from companies committed to using non-BPA cans and containers. Find a list here: <https://insteading.com/blog/bpa-free-cans/>
4. Phthalates in many plastics to help them stay soft, and in personal care products, air fresheners, antibiotics, and pharmaceuticals. Avoid phthalates in children's toys especially.
5. Perfluorooctanoic Acid (PFOA) in Teflon and similar non-stick cookware, some microwave popcorn bags, and treatments applied to material for stain prevention.
6. Organotins, such as tributyltin, a fungicide and heat stabilizer often used in PVC piping; also to protect boats from marine organisms growing on their hulls.
7. Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), which were widely employed in paints, sealants, and adhesives. Banned in the 1970s, they remain in the environment.

chemicals on our hormones evolves, so, too, does our understanding and appreciation of many other ubiquitous factors at play.

Similar to patterns of other health disparities, obesity tends to be less common in those with more money and more education. On average, those living in rural communities develop more obesity, as do those who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. Solutions are multi-layered and span areas from environmental advocacy to health care delivery to early education to the role of stress to the uneven distribution of access to healthy foods.

## Obstacles to cure

So where does homeopathy fit in? Many places. One philosophical tenet of homeopathy is the idea of “obstacles to cure.” By this, we mean exposures, relationships, and other personal habits and patterns that may stand in the way of homeopathy

(or other forms of medicine or therapy) working as well as it might.

For example, if a patient with asthma works in an industry where she is constantly exposed to chemical fumes or mold, and her asthma is worsening by the month, we can treat her homeopathically and she might get partial improvement. But if she continues to spend her days in this toxic environment, she will be significantly less likely to respond well to treatment. When I see a patient with a clear obstacle to cure such as this, I work with them to offer information and explore ways their situation might be improved.

It’s important to remember, however, that obstacles to cure are based on an *individual’s susceptibility*; so something that gets in the way of healing for one person might cause no problem for another person. Genetic inheritance, choices made throughout life, environmental exposures, and underlying constitutional remedy type are examples of the kinds of

8. Flame retardants used in furniture, electronics, drapery, and more. Although many are off the market, they can persist for decades.
9. Food additives, such as artificial sweeteners, preservatives, and high fructose corn syrup.<sup>2</sup>
10. Air pollution, which contains a plethora of toxic contaminants including obesogens.<sup>3</sup>

## 10 ways to reduce exposure

1. Reduce plastic use and never use them in the microwave. Store leftovers in glass.
2. Choose less toxic personal and home care products. Ditch chemical air purifiers and scented candles. Choose fragrance-free products. Studies show that many scented items emit volatile organic compounds, which are hazardous to health and have obesogenic impact.<sup>4</sup>
3. Review medications to see if any can be reduced or eliminated, as many have obesogenic components, especially SSRIs, thiazolidinedione, and diethylstilbestrol.
4. Avoid products treated with flame retardants when buying furniture and household items.
5. Do not drink from plastic water bottles. Switch to glass or stainless steel.
6. Shift toward organic foods. Choose meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy without antibiotics and hormones. Work toward a more plant-based diet because as we go up the food chain, chemicals, including

obesogens, concentrate further. Check the Environmental Working Group’s Dirty Dozen and Clean Fifteen each year to help guide your food shopping choices.<sup>5</sup>

7. Avoid additives and preservatives, when buying prepared foods.
8. Filter your drinking water to remove chemicals.
9. Vacuum regularly to cut down on dust that often carries chemicals though your home.
10. Remove your shoes at the door, to bring less toxic residues from your city, sidewalk, or yard into your home.

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obstacles that might get in the way of a person being able to attain optimal weight.

### They're everywhere: obesogens

One alarming environmental obstacle to the ability to lose weight for some people is the obesogen. Obesogens are chemicals in our food, water, air, household, and personal products that disrupt our hormones. They are found in a myriad of forms, at startling rates, throughout our home and outdoor environments. As obesogens are increasingly studied, we are gaining a more comprehensive understanding of how their ubiquity is at least partly to blame for our galloping rates of obesity across the world.<sup>3</sup>

Obesogens were first researched for their impact on reproductive systems in the animal world, but as studies multiply, evidence of far-reaching ways obesogens influence health on every system of the body have become clearer.<sup>4</sup> They impact metabolism and weight by changing the way fat cells develop and by increasing energy storage in fat tissue. They also disrupt the biochemical oversight of appetite and satiety, and impact the variety and strength of the microbiome. Research shows they influence physiology by acting similarly to innate hormones, by binding to receptors in various parts of fat and other cells. This impacts the way a cell responds or the way a gene in the cell is expressed.<sup>5</sup>

Many of the actions and alterations that obesogens cause are considered to be lifelong and, more alarmingly, passed down through generations.<sup>6</sup> Women hoping to become pregnant or during pregnancy should take special care to reduce exposures, for the potential impact on both fertility and the health of the baby. Relatedly, men's general health *prior to conception* has been shown to be essential to healthy outcomes for pregnancy, too.<sup>7</sup> Obesogens may change metabolic set-points and lead to being overweight early in life, a risk factor for a lifelong struggle with weight.

For these reasons, I encourage all my patients to limit or avoid obesogens as much as possible, especially if they are trying to lose weight or want to conceive children. For tips on how to avoid obesogens, see "Toxins that Make Us Fat" on page 26.

### Boosting self-agency

Besides identifying and working to remove obstacles to cure, where else does homeopathy fit into weight loss? A well-aimed constitutional remedy helps a patient lose weight by improving their self-agency—their feelings of being in control of their

lives and their ability to take positive action—which increases their capacity to make and keep new health habits. I have seen this time and again in my 35 years of practice. And this was one of my goals for Sandy, who was introduced earlier in this article.

At our first meeting, I learned about Sandy as a person and how her presenting symptoms fit into her life story. At 60 pounds overweight, Sandy felt badly about her junk food diet and lack of exercise. She had a long history of being unhappy and feeling unworthy, and she was filled with disgust about herself and her weight. She had never partnered, as she was too ashamed of her body. At a deep level, she felt she was not lovable.

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During her childhood, she was often put down and yelled at. In her teen years, she was on the outskirts of different friend groups but never felt truly included. In college, she struggled with depression alongside galloping weight gain and almost complete self-isolation.

Sandy was not a person who was just overweight. She came from a long line of people who were overweight, so the cards were stacked against her right from the start. She grew up in an environment where she was not nurtured and encouraged, but rather questioned at every turn and put down. With this background, she never grew a good sense of self. And then when any problems or challenges arose, she did not have support or self-agency to correct them.

### A fitting remedy

This is a common story for people who benefit from taking the homeopathic remedy *Thuja occidentalis*. They often lack a clear sense of self. They have self-doubt, self-loathing, and shame. In their histories, we often see various forms of being suppressed or hemmed in by parents, siblings, teachers, coaches, or others in positions of power.

As people needing *Thuja* get sicker, they can be negatively impacted by anyone around them, not just by people in power. With an already shaky sense of self, a person needing *Thuja* can be easily pushed into places where they are truly unhappy

### For more on homeopathy and weight loss:

See my articles from the **Homeopathy Today** archives at [www.homeopathycenter.org/homeopathy-today/](http://www.homeopathycenter.org/homeopathy-today/)

- "Battle the Bulge and Get Healthy: A Whole Person Approach to Metabolic Syndrome," Winter 2011.
- "Less is More: the Ultimate Resolution, Weight Loss for the New Year," Winter 2013.

and do not feel they are worth much. (This characteristic is similar to people who need *Staphysagria*, but with the latter, their low self-esteem stems more from a frailty of ego than from a lack of sense of self. People who need *Staphysagria* often lash out at others, whereas people needing *Thuja* rarely do.) Sandy also had confirmatory symptoms of *Thuja*, such as her chronic sinus issues; and like many who respond well to this remedy, she spoke softly and often trailed off with her thoughts.

While I hoped *Thuja* would address Sandy's sinusitis and fatigue, I especially wanted it to help her depression. Being depressed often includes a strong component of diminished self-agency, and Sandy displayed a fair amount of "oh, it doesn't matter" kind of attitude. She spent a lot of time zoning out in front of the television.

I wanted *Thuja* to give her the boost she needed to do many (or any!) of the things she needed to do, such as cutting out fast food, eating more vegetables, stopping eating earlier in the evening, and starting some kind of exercise plan. A good constitutional remedy often does just that. It rights the ship, giving the person a glimmer of a horizon to work toward. In the best case scenario, a constitutional remedy gives the person a shot of energy that's essential to fueling the lifestyle changes needed to ultimately lose weight. I prescribed one dose of *Thuja* 200c.

### Small steps

To address Sandy's lifestyle, I decided to begin on the exercise side of the equation. I felt that if she began to move more, it would help her mood alongside the positive effect of the homeopathic remedy. So I showed her where to access the pedometer on her cellphone and asked her to spend a week raising her consciousness about how many steps she took in a day. It was under 700 steps. So we set the goal of 2000 steps a day. We talked about having well-fitted sneakers, about where she might walk in her neighborhood, and about what time of day might work best for her schedule. Helping patients visualize a plan can often be the first step in starting the plan.

With regard to diet, people who need *Thuja* can be somewhat rule-bound. This grows out of their need to keep things as under control as they can, so people cannot see the parts of them they don't want to be seen. So I knew I could give Sandy a few rules related to eating, and she would likely be able to follow them.

This is what I recommended for Sandy at our first visit:

- One salad a day with at least five veggies in it, with olive oil and vinegar dressing
- One small handful of nuts per day
- No eating after 7:00 pm.

That's it. I find that if I overload patients with too many recommendations, especially related to the emotionally charged area of food, the whole program collapses. I also

appreciated that Sandy had been overweight for decades, so we wanted to move slowly and, hopefully, in a permanent way. And when people make small changes, and from different angles, they often find more confidence and resolve. They begin to move in an affirming upward spiral, where positive steps bring along more positive steps.

### Clearer and lighter

In the next few months after taking *Thuja*, Sandy reported having "a clearer head." Interestingly, she had not complained of any type of thinking difficulties at our first visit, even when queried directly about it. I have seen this often in my practice, where a person does not have the sense that something is "off" or not working optimally until it shifts in a positive direction, and then it becomes evident! She also reported feeling lighter in mood. She'd reached out to a co-worker to have lunch, something she'd never done before. She said she now felt "a kind of purpose, like I have to get my steps in." She had been hitting the 2000 steps-per-day mark most days and went beyond that goal on some days. I did not ask her about her weight at this time because, while it was an important part of her health challenges, I knew her psychological state was even more important, and essential to weight loss.

We continued to meet every few months, and as Sandy started to lose weight, she became more motivated to make healthy lifestyle changes. Some suggestions did not work for her, so we kept trying until she found a good enough balance with an anti-inflammatory diet, lots of water, and consistent exercise. (See "7 Healthy Steps to a Lighter You" on page 30.)

## When people make small changes, and from different angles, they often find more confidence and resolve.

In all, Sandy lost about 40 pounds over the five years we worked intensively together, which she was thrilled about. In that time, she upped her daily walking to 7000-8000 steps and began doing some weight training, using online classes at home.

I have given her *Thuja* several times over these years, in increasing potencies, when she has felt down or down on herself, and she bounces back. I now see her once a year, just for a tune up and check in, and she has kept that weight off in the intervening years.

Sandy no longer suffers with sinusitis anymore. And she has really come out of her shell, getting together with a small group of women friends who gather regularly (now by Zoom). With them, she has found support and camaraderie.



# 7 HEALTHY STEPS to a Lighter You

For my patients who wish to lose weight, here are my top seven recommendations (in addition to reducing obesogen exposure):

## 1. See a homeopath for constitutional treatment.

A remedy that matches you overall will increase your resolve to eat better and exercise more, which can help reset your metabolism. It can also help your mood and sleep, both essential to weight loss and maintenance. An experienced practitioner should also help you find a diet appropriate to your nature and capacity for change, informed by your underlying constitutional state. For instance, if I have a patient who needs the remedy *Calcarea carbonica*, I know they will do well with a program like Weight Watchers© because there's a plan, a list, small directions, and a lot of support—an organized, methodical approach that resonates with their nature. More free-thinking patients less drawn to rules, like a person needing *Sulphur*, might have better results with a program like Intuitive Eating, which offers a looser "self-care eating framework."  
[[www.intuitiveeating.org](http://www.intuitiveeating.org)]

## 2. Lengthen your overnight fast.

If you snack at 11 pm and breakfast at 6 am, you have a 7-hour overnight fast. A 12 to 14 hour fast will increase insulin sensitivity and help use fat stores for energy. This intermittent fasting has you feeling more disciplined, lowers your appetite, and increases your feelings of satiety. Giving your digestive system a break also allows time for your immune system to do more focused and effective work. I encourage patients to slowly lengthen their overnight fast by a half-hour a week, till they reach their

I think part of why Sandy has kept the weight off is that we were able to use homeopathy to address some of her backstory, which had impacted her sense of self. As a result, she no longer had the same issues weighing so heavily on her heart and spirit. It's not that her history has changed, rather, her relationship to it has.

## The path to better health

Obesity is one of our largest national health crises, long in the making, without easy, enforceable strategies to counter it. Using homeopathy, however, we can help address a person's underlying imbalance and illness, shifting their susceptibility to various obstacles to weight loss, increasing their resolve to make positive lifestyle changes, and improving their metabolism to help shed pounds. While homeopathy does not offer a



goal. Black coffee does not count, by the way, so you can still have your morning Cuppa Joe, just no cream and sugar! (While some people worry that coffee may antidote the action of a homeopathic remedy, this has not been my experience with the majority of patients.)

## 3. Do aerobic exercise.

Find a time to fit in at least 30 minutes of daily aerobic activity, which is essential to optimal weight. Walking counts! Online dance or exercise classes work. Climbing the steps in your apartment building can do in a pinch. Throughout the rest of the day, be mindful of too much sitting in front of the computer or TV. Take stretching breaks, do a few jumping jacks, turn on music and dance in the kitchen—activity like this helps to lower the negative impacts of a sedentary lifestyle.

A well-trained homeopath should be able to help guide you toward the kind of exercise that will appeal to you, based on your constitutional remedy type. An intense, hard-driving person, who does well with the remedy *Nux vomica*, for example, might love *CrossFit*.

quick fix for weight loss, constitutional prescribing can support a person in their steady journey towards better health, as it has for Sandy.

I hope you have found a few ideas here that might help you or a family member, and perhaps you've gained a broader understanding of the many factors that affect weight gain and weight loss. Remember, working toward optimal weight is worth the effort, as it impacts so very many aspects of health. Best of luck to you as you make your way through our challenging times! 💧

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A delicate, sensitive person, who does well with the remedy *Silica*, will probably like gentler approaches, such as restorative yoga and walking.

**4. Sleep well.** Short sleep and low-quality sleep lead to fatigue—which contributes to poor food choices, extra calories, and less motivation for exercise. Homeopathic remedies have been used effectively for sleep issues for hundreds of years. Unlike most conventional sleep medications, they are non-habit-forming, non-addictive, and free of long-term side effects. See a credentialed homeopath for this prescription because remedies are most effective when they address the whole person, not just the symptom of insomnia. Licensed naturopathic doctors also offer effective, non-pharmaceutical approaches to help you sleep better.<sup>1,2</sup>

**5. Examine your stress and anxiety levels.** Over the last year, the constant pressure of the pandemic has led to off-the-charts levels of stress and anxiety for many people! As stress mounts, so do cortisol levels, which increase insulin levels, which cause an increase in cravings for fatty and sweet foods. I've written on these subjects before, and you can find references at right. I recommend a constitutional homeopathic remedy from a qualified practitioner to help raise your threshold for feeling stress. As a naturopathic doctor, I offer additional approaches, including exercise, mindfulness, and addressing the microbiome.<sup>3,4,5,6,7</sup>

**6. Eat an anti-inflammatory diet.** Lean away from foods high in calories but low in nutrients, like candy and packaged snack-foods, which cause inflammation. Chronic inflammation contributes to weight

gain by increasing water retention, slowing metabolism, and increasing insulin resistance. Lean into vegetables, fruit, nuts and seeds, lean proteins, cultured and fermented foods, and healthy fats. Naturopathic approaches to decrease inflammation can also help.<sup>8</sup>

**7. Lose weight together.** Get together with a friend or family member, and work up a weight-loss plan that you can do together. Choose someone encouraging and supportive, who enjoys similar activities as you. Strategize together, celebrate small wins, and be there for each other when one of you falls short. We all need support at times, and weight loss is one of those times.

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