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Obesity research confirms long-term weight loss almost impossible

No known cure for obesity except surgically shrinking the stomach

By Kelly Crowe, CBC News Posted: Jun 04, 2014 5:00 PM ET | Last Updated: Jun 04, 2014 10:34 PM ET



The nasty reality is that humans are efficient biological machines. "We have evolved not to lose weight." (Reuters)



Permanent weight loss is a losing battle 2:23

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Kelly Crowe
Medical science

Kelly Crowe is a medical sciences correspondent

There's a disturbing truth that is emerging from the science of obesity. After years of study, it's becoming apparent that it's nearly impossible to permanently lose weight.

As incredible as it sounds, that's what the evidence is showing. For psychologist Traci Mann, who has spent 20 years running an eating lab at the University of Minnesota, the evidence is clear. "It couldn't be easier to see," she says. "Long-term weight loss happens to only the smallest minority of people."

We all think we know someone in that rare group. They become the legends — the friend of a friend, the brother-in-law, the neighbour — the ones who really did it.

But if we check back after five or 10 years, there's a good chance they will have put the weight back on. Only about five per cent of people who try to lose weight ultimately succeed, according to the research. Those people are the outliers, but we cling to their stories as proof that losing weight is possible.

"Those kinds of stories really keep the myth alive," says University of Alberta professor Tim Caulfield, who researches and writes about health misconceptions. "You have this confirmation bias going on where people point to these very specific examples as if it's proof. But in fact those are really exceptions."

Our biology taunts us, by making short-term weight loss fairly easy. But the weight creeps back, usually after about a year, and it keeps coming back until the original weight is regained or worse.

This has been tested in randomized controlled trials where people have

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2:23

After years of study, it's becoming apparent that

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science correspondent for CBC News, specializing in health and biomedical research. She joined CBC in 1991, and has spent 25 years reporting on a wide range of national news and current affairs, with a particular interest in science and medicine.

been separated into groups and given intense exercise and nutrition counselling.

Even in those highly controlled experimental settings, the results show only minor sustained weight loss.

When Traci Mann analyzed all of the randomized control trials on long-term weight loss, she discovered that after two years the average amount lost was only one kilogram, or about two pounds, from the original weight.

Tiptoeing around the truth

So if most scientists know that we can't eat ourselves thin, that the lost weight will ultimately bounce back, why don't they say so?

Tim Caulfield says his fellow obesity academics tend to tiptoe around the truth. "You go to these meetings and you talk to researchers, you get a sense there is almost a political correctness around it, that we don't want this message to get out there," he said.

"You'll be in a room with very knowledgeable individuals, and everyone in the room will know what the data says and still the message doesn't seem to get out."

In part, that's because it's such a harsh message. "You have to be careful about the stigmatizing nature of that kind of image," Caulfield says. "That's one of the reasons why this myth of weight loss lives on."

Health experts are also afraid people will abandon all efforts to exercise and eat a nutritious diet — behaviour that is important for health and longevity — even if it doesn't result in much weight loss.

Traci Mann says the emphasis should be on measuring health, not weight. "You should still eat right, you should still exercise, doing healthy stuff is still healthy," she said. "It just doesn't make you thin."



Last fall, the Dubai government launched a 30-day weight loss challenge called "Your Weight in Gold" to encourage dieters and combat growing obesity in the Gulf Arab emirate. It should probably save its money if the current science is right. (Reuters)

We are biological machines

But eating right to improve health alone isn't a strong motivator. The research shows that most people are willing to exercise and limit caloric intake if it means they will look better. But if they find out their weight probably won't change much, they tend to lose motivation.

That raises another troubling question. If diets don't result in weight loss, what does? At this point the grim answer seems to be that there is no known cure for obesity, except perhaps surgically shrinking the stomach.

Research suggests bariatric surgery can induce weight loss in the extremely obese, improving health and quality of life at the same time. But most people will still be obese after the surgery. Plus, there are risky side effects, and many will end up gaining some of that weight back.

If you listen closely you will notice that obesity specialists are quietly adjusting the message through a subtle change in language.

These days they're talking about weight maintenance or "weight management" rather than "weight loss."

It's a shift in emphasis that reflects the emerging reality. Just last week the headlines announced the world is fatter than



Pauline Dakin report

it's nearly impossible to permanently lose weight



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it has ever been, with **2.1 billion people** now overweight or obese, based on an analysis published in the online issue of the British medical journal *The Lancet*.



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Jannette Beard

OK why is the only people quoted here NOT trained in actual human metabolic science?? where is the link to this study?

Traci Mann: Ph.D.: Psychology, Stanford University, 1995.

Klim McPherson: Nuffield Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology

Timothy Caulfield: BSc (Alberta), LL.B. (Alberta), LL.M. (Dalhousie), Canada Research Chair in Health Law and Policy; Trudeau Fellow; Senior Health Scholar, Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research; Professor, Faculty of Law and School of... » more

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Corn_Dog

Lazy journalism, misleading. Expect more from Kelly Crowe.

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diabetic in calgary

Diagnosed with diabetes Dec 2013 with a HbA1c of 9.1 mmol/l. Normal in Calgary as per the lab is 4.3 to 6.1 mmol/l. At the next blood test in May 2014 the HbA1c glucose dropped to 5.6 mmol/l, which is normal. Along with the high glucose my waist was 114 mm (now 106), high triglycerides and LDL cholesterol. The HDL cholesterol in good. I think the secret to fat loss is to do what your grandma did in the 1960's to stay slim before the politicians started playing with our countries health and... » more

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Ann Marie

If people would eat real food instead of the processed crap that is on most of the store shelves they may be surprised at how they feel and weigh. I am losing weight slowly but steadily since I changed my eating habits.

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Owmcgoer

I am currently going through an excellent program through the Ottawa Weight Management Clinic at the Ottawa Hospital. I know that the biggest hurdle will not be losing the weight, but keeping it off. This article is irresponsible. What is Kelly saying? That we, the overweight, should all just give up and keep eating or that we all should risk serious complications or even death via bariatric surgery? Is the fact that keeping weight off is hard really news? Very poor reporting.

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karen

Surely this only happens because people can't stick to a restrictive diet for the rest of their lives, and once they stop the diet, the weight comes back on. If you were able to lose the weight in the first place, and you stuck with the same eating programme for life, then you wouldn't return to your original weight.

It is incredibly hard, and I speak as one of the ones who can't do it!! The reason I can't do it is purely because I lack willpower which I am sure is the case for so many of ... » more

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RaspberryGirl

I read this article yesterday, and have to admit it made me angry. I was almost afraid to check back to see comments, but am pleased and refreshed to see that common sense appears to be prevailing.

I think that Kelly Crowe and the CBC have done the Canadian public a disservice by publishing this piece. It makes gross assumptions and neglects to include the most basic of definitions or explanations. Is obesity due to lifestyle and obesity due to physiological issues (endocrine problems, etc.)... » more

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TryPositiveThinking

No known cure for obesity. That's like saying no known cure for smoking.

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