

National Weight Control Registry

The National Weight Control Registry is a study of US residents who have been successful in losing weight and keeping it off. It was started in 1993 by Drs Rena Wing and James Hill. Participants had to have lost 13.5kg or more and kept it off for at least one year in order to be admitted into the study. The idea was to study the characteristics of successful people rather than focusing on the results of treatment programs where most of the people failed to reach their goals. Currently there are more than 4500 people in the registry. Eighty percent are women. The average weight loss was 60lbs. The average participant has kept the weight off for 5 years. Most (66%) had been overweight as children. Most had tried other diets in the past. Almost all of the participants reported making several prior attempts before achieving long-term success. About half said they received help from some type of program, like Weight Watchers or Jenny Craig. The other half did it on their own.

Almost all of the participants (90 percent) changed both their eating behaviour and level of physical activity. They counted calories to maintain an intake of approximately 1400calories/day. They ate regular meals and weighed themselves regularly. Most people in registry reported changing their food choices by having a wide variety of food available, choosing smaller portions and limiting, but not eliminating, high-calorie, low-nutrient foods like fat and alcohol. They exercised in excess of US Government Guidelines, averaging 400+ calories/day of energy expenditure. Their most common physical activities were walking and aerobic dance.

The personal meaning or importance of weight loss was crucial to success. Participants were asked why they were finally able to achieve success after previous failed attempts: what was different? Participants reported being motivated by social and health reasons. Three-quarters said that the difference was some sort of cathartic event. One-third said that health-related reasons (heart attack, diagnosis of diabetes, etc.) tipped the scales in the right direction. Many reported emotionally based reasons, like being humiliated on an airplane because they were unable to fit into their seat. The registry provides strong evidence that people with strong motives are more likely to achieve long-term success.