

What are the Scales Really Telling You?

For many women, their daily “weigh-in” sets the tone for their whole day. Whatever the scale says will dictate their mood and level of self-confidence for the day. Losing a few pounds is often followed with elation, self-confidence and feelings of self-control. On the other hand, weight gain triggers feelings of self-loathing, depression, and lowered self-confidence, and often results in avoiding social contacts. In 1984, *Glamour* magazine’s survey found that almost two-thirds of women reported that their weight often affects how they feel about themselves. Almost all respondents reported that their weight sometimes affected how they feel about themselves.

This reliance on body weight as a measure of self-worth ignores all other aspects of the individual, and how other aspects of the individual may contribute to self-esteem.

Further, “scale weight” as a measure of body mass or body fat is extremely unreliable. Over 50% of the total body weight for women is water. When weight is lost, especially in the initial stages of dieting, often this is largely due to dehydration. This is particularly so when the diet followed is low carbohydrate. Carbohydrates, when they break down after digestion, are stored in the body as glycogen. Glycogen readily bonds with water molecules, at a rate of 2.7 grams of water for each gram of glycogen. Since water weighs heavy, a reduced intake of carbohydrates reduces the overall water level in cells, and therefore in the body as a whole. This means weighing in lighter, without any reduction in body fat or body mass. As more carbohydrate is eaten the water level in the body again rises. The reduction in the body’s water level is the key to the fantastic “successes” of many fad diets. There is immediate “success” as the scales read lighter; however, the bulk of weight lost is due to loss of water. After the first week or so, there is a noticeable slowing in the rate of weight loss, and sometimes even weight gain, despite strict adherence to the diet. For many dieters, rather than seeing this as the slowing of the water loss/dehydration process, it is interpreted as a need to eat even less, or as a lapse in willpower.

Fluctuations in water balance are more extreme if bingeing and purging (vomiting, laxative abuse, abuse of diuretics) are also occurring. This is because vomiting and purgative abuse lead to temporary dehydration, followed by “rebound” water retention.