

UNEXPLAINED WEIGHT LOSS

What is happening? Should I worry?

You are losing weight without knowing why, without exercising, and without dieting. A weight loss of over 5% of your total weight in 6 months or over 10% in 12 months should trigger concern.

What is causing this to happen?

There are many causes of unexplained weight loss. Most of the time it is a normal variation (benign or of no concern). Any time the amount of calories consumed and absorbed is less than the amount that is metabolized or burned, weight loss occurs. Other possible causes include medical conditions such as:

1. Metabolic disorders: Hyperthyroidism, diabetes, adrenal insufficiency, hyperparathyroidism, pheochromocytoma
2. Cancer: Any tumor is possible; the GI tract should not be overlooked
3. Infection: Hidden bacterial or fungal infection, amebic infection/abscess, HIV, tuberculosis
4. Neurological/Psychiatric disorders: Depression, anorexia, alcoholism, dementia, Parkinson's disease, stroke
5. Medications that may cause weight loss (many)
6. Gastrointestinal diseases: Ulcers, reflux, gallstones, inflammatory bowel diseases, hepatitis, pancreatitis, atrophic gastritis, malabsorption
7. Other heart, lung, kidney, connective tissue, & oral disorders

What will the doctor do to determine what is causing my weight loss?

Usually, a complete physical exam needs to be done, including various lab tests that will help to identify or rule out various causes. Your doctor may order blood counts, metabolic profiles, urine studies, a chest X-ray, and other studies (for example, gastrointestinal endoscopy if symptoms or physical findings are present). Sometimes, even after an extensive work-up, a specific cause is not found, or perhaps the cause is only discovered after other symptoms develop. Any new symptoms in these cases need to be reported promptly to your doctor.

Is there any treatment available?

The main treatment plan will be aimed at treating the underlying cause. For example, any depression, hyperthyroidism, diabetes, infection, cancer, gastrointestinal disorders or other contributing conditions must be treated. If you smoke, you should stop. Intravenous feeding may be needed if the weight loss is severe. If no specific cause is found, or weight loss continues despite treatment because of a decreased appetite, there are some medications that may help stimulate the appetite, such as megestrol, cyproheptadine or mirtazapine. To help reverse the weight loss, do your best to eat high-calorie foods and drink nutritional supplements, preferably high in good fats and proteins.