

Men are from Mars; Women are from Venus Tailoring dietary advice for men

Jane DeVille-Almond

With more men than women suffering from overweight and obesity in the UK, HCP's need to know how to target weight loss advice for the male population. Jane DeVille-Almond, Senior Lecturer, University of Wolverhampton and Vice Chair, National Obesity Forum investigates effective ways to help your male patients manage their weight.

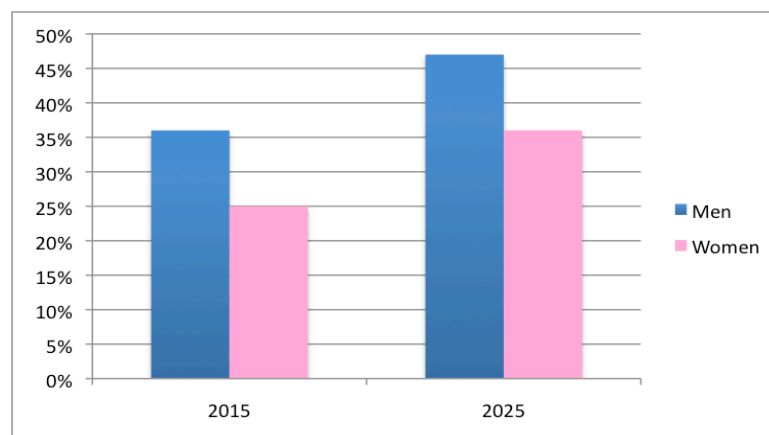
*"Show me a woman who doesn't feel guilt and I'll show you a man."
(Erica Jong)*

Daily headline grabbing press releases remind us that we are becoming an obesogenic society and that it's a global problem. Featuring pictures of size 10 female models, they are clouding the issue of obesity, with many women imagining a healthy weight (BMI 20-25) is still too fat, and many men not having a clue about what they should weigh and whether their weight is putting their health at risk. Patients with weight problems all need specialist help. However, should this help be the same for both sexes or do men and women require different approaches?

Is health advice reaching the right people?

65% men and 56% women are currently overweight or obese in the UK¹. However, it tends to be women who get targeted for their weight by the press, commercial weight loss services and the NHS. Logging onto the NHS choices website I was surprised to discover the majority of people in the 'obesity health video' were women. Women who have lost weight were interviewed; women doing exercises were shown in the background and a female dietician talked about simple steps to weight loss. Only one man appeared.

The underlying cause of heart disease in the UK is lifestyle and obesity so with more men than women overweight and obese (and this trend projected to continue – see graph 1) it will be of little surprise that more men suffer with cardiovascular disease. Furthermore between the ages of 35 - 64 around 15,853 men die annually of all diseases related to the circulatory system compared to 6,063 women². This disparity is common in other areas of health as well with more men than women dying from all common cancers that affect both sexes³.



Graph 1: The Foresight Report Obesity projection⁴

1 / 4

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Physical activity levels

It's not just weight that's a problem but also the amount of physical activity adults in the UK are taking part in. Current government physical activity recommendations for adults are that they should achieve a total of at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on five or more days a week. Currently in the UK, amongst adults (aged 16-24)⁴:

- 40% of men and 28% women achieve government recommendation
- About one third (32%) were not aware of a recommendation
- 40% had heard of a recommendation but did not know what it was
- 28% knew the recommendation for physical activity.

Weight loss approaches: men vs women

There is currently little research on the different approaches for weight loss between men and women. Anecdotally it seems women often attempt to lose weight to look better whereas men will often attempt to lose weight to achieve something, e.g. becoming physically fitter, being able to do their job better or to improve their health.

Women also appear to enjoy a group approach (hence the success of commercial slimming clubs such as Slimming World, Weight Watchers and Rosemary Conley) whereas men will often join a gym to try and achieve success.

One of the main differences between men and women is that many men refuse to acknowledge that they have a problem with their weight⁵. In a study carried out at Lymm truck stop with over 100 male truck drivers, 100% failed to guess their waist measurement correctly. All underestimated some by 19 inches and although 78% were medically deemed obese by BMI or increased waist measurement only 10% thought they were⁶.

Advising men in practice

Whilst working with men, it became apparent that they have a general lack of knowledge regarding calories in the simplest of foods. This did not seem the case with women. There was also the problem of portion control - the larger the man the more likely it was that the person feeding him would pile up his portion of food - related to the idea of a 'masculine' portion. Although we should try not to stereotype, it is important to recognize that men respond to a different type of health campaign to women and therefore we should ensure that we have clear social marketing messages that aims to target men. For example much of my research suggests that men like a challenge and therefore a competition element to a male weight loss programme is much more likely to get men engaged. This approach does not tend to work as well with women.

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Ten top tips to help men lose weight

1. It may seem obvious but do make sure he really wants to lose weight as being ready to change behaviour is the key to success
2. Men tend not to respond well when told what to do so include him in the decision making
3. Help him understand about calories and portions and then set competitive tasks
4. Talk about 'physical activity' rather than 'exercise', as 'exercise' is likely to make him think of pumping iron in the gym. Also it's important to remind him that changes in activity will not necessarily lead to weight loss but will lead to other health benefits ⁴.
5. Set him weekly challenges such as:
 - preparing his own meals for a day
 - sitting at a table for all his meals for one day
 - seeing how slowly he can eat a meal
 - giving up fizzy drinks for a week
 - getting involved with family cooking
 - drinking more water
6. Remind him that his sex life is likely to improve along with his energy levels
7. Ask him to take a photo on his mobile phone of everything he eats or drinks in a day and email it to you. This will give you the opportunity to see if he really does understand calories and portion control
8. Keep in touch with regular texts - it's easy and simple and most men seem to respond to these rather than having to keep making appointments
9. Ensure the service is accessible to working men (e.g. outside of 9 – 5, or alternative venues)
10. Finally, do make sure your scales weigh over 30 stone

CASE STUDY

History: Matt, a 36-year-old truck driver, started seeing me after an accident at work. His boss wanted him to lose weight as he was becoming a hazard in the workplace. Matt's weight had never really bothered him and his wife had never nagged him to lose weight as she loved him either way. In July 2010 a simple fall off a footpath whilst at work led to an ambulance being called. Matt was so big that two ambulance men were unable to lift him off the floor. It was at this point Matt knew he needed to do something about it.

First meeting: At our first meeting Matt weighed 153.2kg with a BMI of 53. It was apparent that he had no understanding of his daily energy requirements so his first task was to work out his calories using the calorie and carb fat bible⁷. I suggested he tried to achieve **1800** calories a day.

Outcome: One week later he had lost an astonishing 5.5kgs. This was the first time Matt had truly understood the link between what he ate and drank and what he weighed. He has since gone on to lose 27kg and has around the same amount to lose again before he reaches his chosen target weight.

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Motivation: For Matt, the catalyst to lose weight included:

- Risk of losing his job
- Embarrassment of not being able to get up from his fall
- Having a young child. He realized if he was going to see her grow up he needed to do something drastic.

He said *'I loved being given the tools to work out my own food plan and didn't want to join a club so Jane called in once a week followed by regular text messages of support. After losing over 27kg (5 stone) I felt so much more confident I decided to join my local slimming world club. There are only two men there, me and one other and I am keen to show the women how much better men are at taking up the challenge of losing weight'*

Other benefits: Since his weight loss Matt reports:

- His snoring (sleep apnoea) has much improved
- He has far more energy than he ever used to have
- His general health has much improved.
- He is delighted and continues to lose weight.



Before



After

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