

What's your New Year's resolution? If you resolve to lose weight or get fit, you are not alone. If your resolve breaks down within a few weeks, you are also not alone.

We tend to think of obesity as a personal issue, but our health is shaped by community decisions too. Obesity rates started climbing in the 1970s. Dependence on the automobile changed our habits and our communities so that we rarely walk anywhere. At school and at work we sit all the time. We watch television for hours, we eat more fast food, we drink sugary beverages, and we keep inventing muscle-sparing conveniences. We have created a world where everywhere we turn there is an opportunity to get fatter.

There are many weight loss strategies—usually eating less and moving more. But as almost anyone who has shed a few pounds can attest, it is very difficult to keep them off. It is a challenge to overcome a strong biologic push to regain lost weight, while navigating a food environment that is flooded with cues to eat.

Most of us would find it nearly impossible to slim down to a "normal" weight, but losing a little weight can have health benefits. Long-term studies show that a sustained moderate weight loss of just 10 percent improves control of blood sugar and high blood pressure, and can improve cholesterol levels and heart function in people with obesity.

There is also evidence that improved fitness from regular physical activity can reduce many of the health hazards of obesity even without weight loss. The Aerobic Center Longitudinal Study followed over 80,000 people over a period of 35 years. Men that were "fat but fit" lived longer than men who were slender but out of shape—in fact, the "fat but fit" men lived nearly as long as normal-weight people. Even without weight loss, many of the health hazards of obesity can be lessened by routine physical activity.

Gaining weight is easy. Losing weight is difficult. Physical fitness is healthy even if you don't lose much weight. So my personal resolution is to be physically active with a regular walking habit.

What community resolutions can we make? Because weight loss is difficult, maintaining a healthy weight is important for everyone, not just people with a weight or health problem. If we as a community focus only on weight loss, we will fall short. We need to prevent unhealthy weight gain in the first place and also improve fitness and health for everyone, whether they lose weight or not.

Setting the course for a lifetime of healthy weight should begin in infancy and early childhood. Studies point to breast-fed babies being at lower risk for obesity, so breast feeding should be considered normal and supported. In and out of school we need to offer healthy food and routine physical activity, not junk food, sugared drinks, and unlimited screen time.

From our homes to our schools, workplaces, churches, and neighborhoods, we as a community should resolve to make it easier for people to eat healthy food and to be physically active as part of their everyday routine, no matter their age or how they are shaped.

William S. Paul, MD, MPH, FACP
Director of Health of Nashville/Davidson County