

Weight Loss Attempts in Adults: Goals, Duration, and Rate of Weight Loss

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ABSTRACT

Objectives. Although attempted weight loss is common, little is known about the goals and durations of weight loss attempts and the rates of achieved weight loss in the general population.

Methods. Data were collected by telephone in 1989 from adults aged 18 years and older in 39 states and the District of Columbia. Analyses were carried out separately for the 6758 men and 14 915 women who reported currently trying to lose weight.

Results. Approximately 25% of the men respondents and 40% of the women respondents reported that they were currently trying to lose weight. Among men, a higher percentage of Hispanics (31%) than of Whites (25%) or Blacks (23%) reported trying to lose weight. Among women, however, there were no ethnic differences in prevalence. The average man wanted to lose 30 pounds and to weigh 178 pounds; the average woman wanted to lose 31 pounds and to weigh 133 pounds. Black women wanted to lose an average of 8 pounds more than did White women, but Black women's goal weight was 10 pounds heavier. The average rate of achieved weight loss was 1.4 pounds per week for men and 1.1 pounds per week for women; these averages, however, may reflect only the experience of those most successful at losing weight.

Conclusions. Attempted weight loss is a common behavior, regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity, and weight loss goals are substantial; however, obesity remains a major public health problem in the United States. (*Am J Public Health.* 1992; 82:1251-1257)

Introduction

Voluntary weight loss is a common practice in the United States and appears to be increasing in prevalence. In national surveys conducted between 1950 and 1966, about 7% of men and 14% of women reported that they were trying to lose weight.^{1,2} A 1978 survey found that 16% of adults were trying to lose weight.^{1,3} More recent data from the 1985 National Health Interview Survey suggest that the prevalence of attempted weight loss has increased substantially; about 25% of men and 45% of women reported that they were trying to lose weight.⁴

Although attempts to lose weight are common, data on specific aspects of this behavior in the general population are limited.¹ Much of our knowledge about voluntary weight loss comes from clinical studies of self-selected subjects, many of whom are severely obese. The findings from such studies may produce biased estimates if applied to the general population.^{1,5,6} The purpose of this study is to describe the age- and race-specific prevalence of weight loss attempts, the goals and duration of such attempts, and the rate of weight loss achieved in a population-based, multistate health practices survey.

Methods

Data Source

Data for this analysis are from the 1989 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) cross-sectional survey of 39 states and the District of Columbia. The BRFSS is a joint effort between the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and participating state health departments. The BRFSS is a random-digit-dialed tele-

phone survey of each state's noninstitutionalized civilian population aged 18 years and older with telephones. Each participating state conducts approximately 100 interviews per month throughout the year, using a multistage cluster design.⁷ All states use an identical core questionnaire, and CDC staff provide standardized training in survey operations. In 1989 the median state response rate (the ratio of completed interviews to the sum of completed interviews and refusals) was 82%. A detailed technical description of the BRFSS has been presented elsewhere.⁸

The BRFSS telephone interview included 65 core questions and took about 25 minutes to administer. The questions on weight control practices were asked of all respondents near the middle of the interview, and followed questions on seat belt use, hypertension, and physical activity. Questions on current self-reported weight and height were asked at the end of the interview.

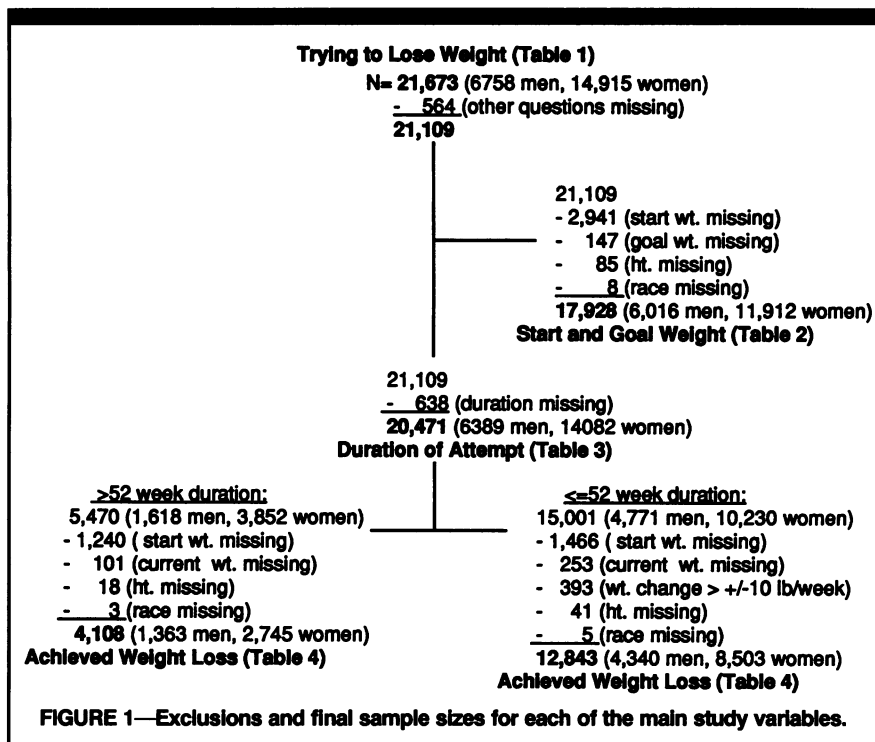
Weight Control Status

Respondents were first asked, "Are you now trying to lose weight?" If they answered no, they were asked, "Are you now trying to maintain your current

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weight, that is, to keep from gaining weight?" Persons who responded no to this question were considered to be doing nothing about their weight. Of the 66 867 respondents who completed the telephone interview, 153 (0.2%) did not answer yes or no to the question of whether they were trying to lose weight, 1680 (2.5%) reported that they were trying to gain weight, and 397 (0.6%) did not answer the question as to whether they were trying to maintain their weight. This left 64 637 persons who could be classified into one of the three groups according to their current weight control status: trying to lose weight ($n = 21\ 673$; 33.5%), trying to maintain weight ($n = 18\ 253$; 28.2%), or doing neither (24 711; 38.3%).

Duration of Weight Loss Attempt

Those who reported that they were trying to lose weight were asked, "About how long ago did you begin your current attempt to lose weight?" We expressed duration of attempted weight loss in terms of weeks; in some analyses persons who reported trying to lose weight for more than 52 weeks were combined with those who reported that they were "always trying to lose weight" and were analyzed as a separate category of duration.

Weight Loss Goal

Persons trying to lose weight were next asked, "About how much did you weigh when you began your current at-

tempt to lose weight?" and "How much would you like to weigh?" These questions were used to estimate the respondents' mean weight at the start of their weight loss attempt and their mean goal weight. We computed the difference between the starting weight and the goal weight as the weight loss goal and expressed both in pounds and in relative terms by dividing the weight loss goal by the starting weight to obtain a percentage weight loss goal. For some analyses we categorized respondents according to four categories of body mass index (BMI: kg/m^2): < 26 , 26 to < 30 , 30 to < 35 , ≥ 35 . We classified persons with a BMI ≥ 30 as obese.⁹

Achieved Weight Loss

We computed the difference between the starting weight and the current weight as the achieved weight "loss" (this included some respondents who had a net gain in weight). The achieved weight loss was computed separately for durations > 52 weeks (including those who reported "always trying to lose weight") and for durations of ≤ 52 weeks. For the respondents who reported a duration of ≤ 52 weeks, we also estimated the rate of achieved weight loss, expressed as pounds per week. We considered a weight change of more than ± 10 pounds per week to be biologically implausible, and the records of persons who reported such high rates were excluded. We also estimated

the prevalence of achieved weight loss of more than 2 pounds per week, a rate that is considered potentially harmful.^{10,11}

Final sample sizes. This analysis focuses primarily on the 21 673 respondents who reported that they were currently trying to lose weight. One state did not ask any of the questions on duration, starting weight, or goal weight; respondents in that state ($n = 564$, 2.6% of the total) were excluded from further analyses, leaving 21 109 respondents to answer the remaining questions. Subsequent exclusions and final sample sizes for each of the main study variables are shown in Figure 1.

Statistical analysis. We report all results separately for men and women. Because of the large sample sizes, we have not emphasized statistical testing; however, P value estimates are given in the accompanying tables. In some analyses we computed age- and race-specific prevalence estimates and their 95% confidence limits (CL).¹² We used the Pearson chi square to test for homogeneity of the prevalence estimates across age and race strata. Weighted least squares estimation was used to statistically test for interaction between age and race on the prevalence estimates.¹³ For those who reported trying to lose weight for 52 weeks or less, we computed the age- and race-specific median duration (in weeks) of weight loss and the 95% CL.¹⁴ Age- and race-specific mean starting and goal weights and mean weight loss goal with 95% CL were estimated by analysis of variance,¹³ which also adjusted for height. Race-specific estimates were also adjusted for age, as were estimates of achieved weight loss and rate of weight loss. Although a higher proportion of Whites (55%) than of Blacks (41%) and Hispanics (44%) had education beyond high school, further adjustment for education had little effect on race-specific estimates.

Results

The mean age of men respondents was 44 years; 85% were White, 63% were married, and 53% had more than 12 years of education. Their mean BMI was 25.7, which is comparable to the most recent national estimate of mean BMI in men of 25.3.¹⁵ The mean age of women respondents was 46 years; 84% were White, 53% were married, and 47% had more than 12 years of education. Their mean current BMI was 24.2, somewhat lower than the national estimate of 25.0.¹⁵

Weight Control Status

About 25% of the men (95% CI = 24%, 26%) reported that they were currently trying to lose weight (Table 1). The peak prevalence of trying to lose weight occurred among those aged 40 to 49 years (30%) and among Hispanics (31%). BMI, however, had a much stronger relationship to the prevalence of trying to lose weight than did age or ethnicity. The prevalence increased more than fivefold between men with a BMI of < 26 (13%) and those with a BMI of > 35 (65%).

Among women, 39% (95% CI = 38%, 40%) reported that they were currently trying to lose weight (Table 1). The association with age was similar to that seen in men; in women, however, ethnicity was unrelated to the prevalence of trying to lose weight. For women as for men, BMI had the strongest relationship to the prevalence of trying to lose weight.

Weight Loss Goal

Among men trying to lose weight, the mean weight at the start of the weight loss attempt was 209 pounds; the mean goal weight was 178 pounds, for a mean weight loss goal of 30 pounds (13.4% of the starting body weight) (Table 2). The youngest age group (18 to 29 years) had lower mean starting and goal weights than did the older age groups. Compared with Whites, Black men had higher mean starting and goal weights, but they also had a slightly higher mean goal weight loss, as did Hispanic men.

Among women trying to lose weight, the mean starting weight was 164 pounds; the mean goal weight was 133 pounds, for a mean weight loss goal of 32 pounds (17.6% of the starting weight) (Table 2). As was true for men, the youngest group had lower mean starting and goal weights than did the older groups. Among women, there were substantial differences in weights and weight loss goals between Whites and Blacks and, to a lesser degree, between Whites and Hispanics. Black women had a 19-pound-heavier mean starting weight and an 11-pound-heavier mean goal weight, but an 8-pound-greater mean weight loss goal, than did their White counterparts.

We found a strong association between gender and starting weight and goal weight (expressed as BMI) (data not shown). Among those in the starting BMI category of 30 to 34.9, 39% of men, compared with 80% of women, had a weight loss goal that would place them in the leanest goal BMI category (< 26). Among

	Trying to Lose, %	Trying to Maintain, %	Neither, %
Men			
	(n = 6758)	(n = 7662)	(n = 12 318)
Age, ^a y			
18–29	20.2	28.4	51.4
30–39	26.4	29.8	43.8
40–49	30.4	29.3	40.4
50–59	29.9	28.0	42.1
60–69	28.0	27.8	44.2
70+	16.0	27.0	57.0
Race ^b			
White	25.1	28.5	46.4
Black	23.4	27.0	49.7
Hispanic ^c	30.8	29.0	40.2
Other	25.6	35.0	39.2
Current BMI, ^d kg/m ²			
<26	12.6	31.6	55.8
26–29.9	40.3	27.1	32.7
30–34.9	56.1	18.7	25.2
≥35	65.1	15.1	19.7
Total	25.2	28.7	46.1
Women			
	(n = 14 915)	(n = 7662)	(n = 12 313)
Age, ^e y			
18–29	40.1	28.8	31.1
30–39	44.0	27.9	28.1
40–49	46.9	27.2	25.9
50–59	43.9	27.8	28.4
60–69	37.3	28.4	34.2
70+	21.4	27.3	51.4
Race ^f			
White	39.1	28.1	32.8
Black	41.1	25.3	33.6
Hispanic ^c	39.7	29.0	31.3
Other	40.6	28.9	30.5
Current BMI, ^g kg/m ²			
<26	29.2	33.0	37.8
26–29.9	58.5	19.1	22.4
30–34.9	63.9	17.4	18.7
≥35	68.6	12.8	18.6
Total	39.3	27.9	32.3
<p>Note. Each percentage is a percentage of its row. Percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding. The chi-square statistics apply only to persons trying to lose weight and are a test for homogeneity of the prevalences across levels of each characteristic. BMI = body mass index.</p> <p>^a χ^2 (df, 5) = 319.6, $P < .001$.</p> <p>^b χ^2 (df, 3) = 24.4, $P < .001$.</p> <p>^c Of those reporting Hispanic origin, 51.0% were from the following states: Arizona (5.7%), California (14.0%), New Mexico (11.0%), Texas (9.5%), Florida (5.8%), and New York (5.0%).</p> <p>^d χ^2 (df, 3) = 3942.4, $P < .001$.</p> <p>^e χ^2 (df, 5) = 1039.2, $P < .001$.</p> <p>^f χ^2 (df, 3) = 6.1, $P < .11$.</p> <p>^g χ^2 (df, 3) = 3157.7, $P < .001$.</p>			

those in the heaviest starting BMI category (≥ 35), 19% of men, compared with 59% of women, wanted to end up in the leanest category. Thus, obese women are two to three times more likely than obese men to have a weight loss goal that would place them in the leanest body weight category.

Duration of Weight Loss Attempts

Among men trying to lose weight, the prevalence of long-term weight loss attempts (defined as trying to lose weight for more than a year or "always trying to lose weight") was 25% and was directly related to age (Table 3). There was a mod-

TABLE 2—Mean Starting Weight, Goal Weight, and Weight Loss Goal (in Pounds) of Persons Currently Trying to Lose Weight

	No.	Starting Weight		Goal Weight		Goal Loss		% ^a
		Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI	
Men								
Age, y								
18–29	1124	202.4	± 1.8	174.8	± 1.0	27.7	± 1.4	12.8
30–39	1633	206.9	± 1.6*	177.5	± 0.8*	29.5	± 1.2*	13.4
40–49	1301	210.9	± 1.8*	179.4	± 0.8*	31.5	± 1.2*	14.0
50–59	843	212.9	± 2.2*	180.5	± 1.2*	32.4	± 1.6*	14.3
60–69	771	211.2	± 2.2*	180.4	± 1.2*	30.8	± 1.6*	13.7
70+	344	209.0	± 3.3*	179.9	± 1.8*	29.1	± 2.4	13.2
Race								
White	5059	207.7	± 0.8	178.0	± 0.4	29.7	± 0.6	13.4
Black	402	216.1	± 3.0*	182.8	± 1.6*	33.2	± 2.2*	14.7
Hispanic	339	212.2	± 3.3*	178.7	± 1.8	33.4	± 2.4*	14.5
Other	216	205.9	± 4.1	176.6	± 2.2	29.3	± 3.1	12.9
All	6016	208.5	± 1.0	178.3	± 0.6	30.1	± 0.6	13.4
Women								
Age, y								
18–29	2753	154.5	± 1.2	125.3	± 0.6	29.2	± 1.0	17.3
30–39	3156	162.4	± 1.2*	129.6	± 0.4*	32.8	± 1.0*	18.3
40–49	2169	166.1	± 1.4*	132.8	± 0.6*	33.3	± 1.2*	18.1
50–59	1513	170.7	± 1.6*	137.1	± 0.8*	33.6	± 1.4*	17.9
60–69	1448	171.9	± 1.8*	141.1	± 0.8*	30.8	± 1.4	16.5
70+	873	169.5	± 2.2*	142.6	± 1.0*	27.0	± 1.8	14.9
Race								
White	9836	162.0	± 0.6	131.3	± 0.2	30.7	± 0.6	17.3
Black	1182	181.1	± 1.8*	142.5	± 0.8*	38.6	± 1.4*	19.7
Hispanic	520	167.0	± 2.8*	134.2	± 1.2	32.8	± 2.2	18.1
Other	374	159.3	± 3.3	130.7	± 1.4	28.6	± 2.5	16.1
All	11 912	164.0	± 0.6	132.5	± 0.4	31.5	± 0.4	17.6

Note. All estimates are adjusted for height. Race-specific estimates are also adjusted for age.
 CI = confidence interval.
^aPercentage of starting body weight.
 *Statistically different ($P < .05$) from 18–29 age group and from Whites.

est relationship between race and long-term weight loss attempts; prevalence ranged from 23% among Black men to 31% among men of "other" race. If the prevalence of long-term weight loss attempts is applied to the total sample of men, then 6% ($0.253 \times 0.252 \times 100$) of all men were trying to lose weight for more than a year.

Among women trying to lose weight, the prevalence of long-term weight loss attempts was 27%, which was similar to that for men (Table 3). There was also a consistent increase in prevalence with increasing age. In contrast to men, however, for women there was a strong association between race and the prevalence of long-term weight loss attempts, which ranged from 18% among Blacks to 29% among Whites. In terms of the total sample, 11% of all women were trying to lose weight for more than a year.

We also estimated the median duration of the current weight loss attempt for

those trying to lose weight for a year or less (data not shown). Among men, the median duration of the current weight loss attempt was 6 weeks (95% CL = ± 0.3 weeks). The median duration increased with increasing age, from 4 weeks among those in the 18 to 29 age group to 12 weeks among men in the 70+ age group. The median duration was 2 weeks shorter for White men than for men of other races. Among women, the median duration of the current weight loss attempt was 4 weeks (95% CL = ± 0.2 weeks). The median duration was 4 weeks for women younger than 50 years of age and rose to 8 weeks for women aged 50 and older. Women of "other" race had a median duration of 8 weeks, compared with 4 weeks for the three racial groups.

Achieved Weight Loss

Among men trying to lose weight for more than 1 year, the mean achieved

weight loss was 12 pounds (Table 4). There was substantial variation in weight loss across age categories, with the highest weight loss (18 pounds) occurring in those aged 18 to 29 years and the smallest loss (10 pounds) occurring in those aged 30 to 39 years. There was a strong relationship between race and achieved weight loss; Hispanic men reported the largest weight loss (19 pounds) and men classified as "other" race reported the smallest loss (11 pounds).

Among men trying to lose weight for 1 year or less, the mean achieved weight loss was 10 pounds and varied strongly with age, ranging from 9 pounds for men aged 30 to 39 to 12 pounds for men aged 60 to 69 (Table 5). The mean rate of weight loss was 1.4 pounds per week; this figure also varied substantially with age, ranging from a loss of 1.6 pounds per week for men aged 18 to 29 to 0.9 pounds for men aged 70 and older. There was little relationship between race and the rate of weight loss in men.

Among women who reported trying to lose weight for more than a year, the mean achieved weight loss was 8.8 pounds (Table 4). As was seen with men, the largest loss (12 pounds) occurred in women aged 18 to 29 and the smallest loss (8 pounds) was among women aged 40 to 49. There was little difference by race in achieved weight loss for women.

Among women trying to lose weight for a year or less, the mean achieved weight loss was 8 pounds and was unrelated to age (Table 5). However, the achieved weight loss was nearly 1.5 pounds lower for Black women (7.2 pounds) than for White women (8.6 pounds). The mean rate of weight loss for women was 1.1 pounds per week and was inversely related to age, ranging from a loss of 1.1 pounds per week for women aged 18 to 29 to a loss of 0.7 pounds per week for women aged 70 years and older. Race was unrelated to the rate of weight loss in women.

The prevalence of a rate of achieved weight loss in excess of 2 pounds per week was 25% for men and 18% for women (data not shown). The prevalence was consistently 5 to 10 percentage points higher for men than for women in all age groups and was inversely related to age. The prevalence ranged from a high of 31% for men aged 18 to 29 years to a low of 10% for women aged 70 years and older. The prevalence was not related to race for either men or women.

Discussion

Using data from a geographically and ethnically diverse sample of adults in the general population, we found that approximately 25% of men and 40% of women were trying to lose weight, with the peak prevalence occurring among persons in their 40s. These findings are similar to those from a recent nationally representative in-person survey of health practices, in which 25% of men and 44% of women reported that they were currently trying to lose weight.⁴

Approximately 25% of both men and women who were currently trying to lose weight could be defined as long-term dieters. Thus, in the total sample, the prevalence of long-term dieting is about 6% of all men and 11% of all women. In a national 1985 Gallup Poll,¹⁶ 16% of women considered themselves "perpetual dieters." This higher estimate may have been due to different definitions of long-term dieting. We found no published estimates of the prevalence of long-term weight loss attempts by men.

The average person trying to lose weight wanted to lose about 30 pounds. This figure is similar to that found in earlier studies of self-selected samples. Ureda¹⁷ found that the median weight loss goal of men and women volunteers in a university-based weight loss program was 35 pounds, and Muhlenkamp and Nelson¹⁸ reported an average weight loss goal of 33 pounds in a sample of clients of a commercial weight loss program (gender not given).

In absolute terms, the weight loss goal was very similar for both men and women, but relative to their starting weights, the goal of women was about one-third higher than that of men (17% vs 13% of body weight). The apparent desire of women to lose a larger proportion of their weight was also reflected in the relationship between starting BMI and goal BMI: women in the heaviest BMI categories at the start of their weight loss attempt were two to three times more likely than men to want to end up in the leanest BMI category. We found no published studies that directly compared weight loss goals of men and women. However, our findings support the view that women are under greater pressure than men to lose weight.¹⁹

The achieved weight loss in this study was similar for long-term dieters and shorter-term dieters. Regardless of duration, the average man had lost 10 to 12 pounds and the average women had lost 8 to 9 pounds. It may be that long-term di-

TABLE 3—Prevalence of Weight Loss Attempt of More than 1 Year's Duration for Men and Women, by Age and Race

Age, ^a y	No. ^b	Prevalence of Current Attempt > 1 Year Duration					
		% ^c	95% CI	Race ^d	No. ^b	% ^c	95% CI
Men							
18-29	1183	12.6	± 1.9	White	5361	25.3	± 0.5
30-39	1732	19.1	± 1.9	Black	430	22.8	± 2.0
40-49	1383	26.8	± 2.3	Hispanic	361	25.2	± 2.3
50-59	892	31.2	± 3.0	Other	232	30.6	± 3.0
60-69	828	38.0	± 3.3				
70+	371	47.2	± 5.1				
All	6389	25.3	± 1.1				
Women							
18-29	3116	15.4	± 1.3	White	11 710	28.8	± 0.4
30-39	3734	23.1	± 1.4	Black	1331	18.3	± 1.1
40-49	2638	27.2	± 1.7	Hispanic	607	22.7	± 1.7
50-59	1803	34.1	± 2.2	Other	430	23.5	± 2.0
60-69	1699	40.1	± 2.3				
70+	1092	45.2	± 3.0				
All	14 082	27.3	± 0.7				

Note. CI = confidence interval.
^a χ^2 (df, 5) = 318.8, $P < .0001$, for men; χ^2 (df, 5) = 612.2, $P < .0001$, for women.
^bThe age- and race-specific sample sizes represent the number of respondents currently trying to lose weight who reported the duration of their weight loss attempt.
^cThe % column represents the proportion of those respondents whose attempt lasted longer than 1 year.
^d χ^2 (df, 3) = 4.9, $P = .18$, for men; χ^2 (df, 3) = 75.8, $P < .0001$, for women.

TABLE 4—Achieved Weight Loss (in Pounds) Among Persons Trying to Lose Weight for More than 1 Year

Age, y	No.	Mean	95% CI	Race	No.	Mean	95% CI
Men							
18-29	120	-18.0	± 3.9	White	1140	-11.5	± 1.2
30-39	285	-9.9	± 2.5*	Black	79	-14.9	± 4.7
40-49	310	-11.5	± 2.4*	Hispanic	80	-18.8	± 4.7*
50-59	236	-11.1	± 2.7*	Other	64	-10.5	± 5.3
60-69	263	-12.8	± 2.5*				
70+	149	-12.9	± 3.5				
All	1363	-12.1	± 1.2				
Women							
18-29	368	-11.8	± 2.2	White	2398	-8.9	± 0.8
30-39	630	-8.8	± 1.8*	Black	170	-7.8	± 3.3
40-49	483	-7.6	± 2.0*	Hispanic	102	-7.2	± 4.3*
50-59	430	-8.3	± 2.0*	Other	75	-9.7	± 4.9
60-69	492	-8.8	± 2.0*				
70+	342	-8.0	± 2.4*				
All	2745	-8.8	± 0.8				

Note. Estimates for all ages and age-specific estimates are adjusted for height only. CI = confidence interval.
 *Statistically different ($P < .05$) from 18-29 age group and from Whites.

eting is simply a marker for difficulty in losing weight. It is also possible that long-term dieters are more likely to lose and regain some of their weight cyclically during any one attempt. However, because our study had information only on starting and current weight, the true underlying

variability in weights of long-term dieters may have been masked.

The higher amount and higher rate of achieved weight loss reported by men are consistent with the results of clinical studies^{20,21} and are a function of the higher average starting weights of men.²² After

TABLE 5—Achieved Weight Loss (in Pounds) Among Persons Trying to Lose Weight for 1 Year or Less

Age, y	No.	Total Loss		Loss per Week		Race	No.	Total Loss		Loss per Week	
		Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI			Mean	95% CI	Mean	95% CI
Men											
18–29	932	–9.4	± 0.8	–1.6	± 0.1*	White	3676	–9.8	± 0.4	–1.4	± 0.1
30–39	1258	–8.9	± 0.7	–1.3	± 0.1*	Black	281	–9.2	± 1.4	–1.2	± 0.2
40–49	940	–9.9	± 0.8	–1.4	± 0.1*	Hispanic	237	–11.8	± 1.6*	–1.3	± 0.2
50–59	557	–11.2	± 1.1*	–1.2	± 0.1*	Other	146	–11.4	± 2.2	–1.4	± 0.3
60–69	479	–12.1	± 1.2*	–1.4	± 0.2*						
70+	174	–10.3	± 2.0	–0.9	± 0.3*						
All	4340	–9.9	± 0.4	–1.4	± 0.1						
Women											
18–29	2219	–8.3	± 0.5	–1.2	± 0.1	White	6939	–8.6	± 0.4	–1.1	± 0.1
30–39	2382	–8.4	± 0.5	–1.1	± 0.8*	Black	897	–7.2	± 0.8*	–1.1	± 0.1
40–49	1574	–8.7	± 0.6	–1.1	± 0.1*	Hispanic	388	–7.9	± 1.3	–1.2	± 0.2
50–59	991	–8.4	± 0.8	–1.1	± 0.1*	Other	279	–7.4	± 1.6	–0.9	± 0.2
60–69	854	–7.9	± 0.8	–0.9	± 0.1*						
70+	483	–8.0	± 1.2	–0.7	± 0.1*						
All	8503	–8.4	± 0.3	–1.1	± 0.03						

Note. Estimates for all ages and age-specific estimates are adjusted for height only. CI = confidence interval.
*Statistically different ($P < .05$) from 18–29 age group and from Whites.

adjusting for starting BMI, we found that the rate of weight loss for men and women was identical at 1.3 pounds per week.

Ethnicity had a modest association with the prevalence of attempted weight loss for men, with Hispanic men reporting the highest prevalence. Black and Hispanic men also tended to weigh more than White men when they started their attempt to lose weight. After controlling for duration, we found that the rate of weight loss was nearly the same for all ethnic groups of men. Previous studies suggest either that there is no difference in “dieting behavior”²³ between Hispanic and Anglo men or that Hispanic men are less inclined to diet to lose weight.²⁴ Our finding of a higher prevalence of attempted weight loss by Hispanic men may reflect the higher socioeconomic status of Hispanics from telephone-owning households.

Among women, however, we found no association between the prevalence of attempted weight loss and ethnicity. A lower prevalence of attempted weight loss has been proposed as a potential cause of the higher levels of obesity in Black women.²⁵ Although studies done in the 1960s suggested that Black women were less likely than White women to try to lose weight,²⁵ more recent studies indicate that there is less difference between Black and White women in the prevalence of attempting to lose weight.^{25–28} We did find differences between White and Black women in weight loss goals. Although Black women had higher starting and goal body weights than did White women, Black women still

wanted to lose about 8 pounds more than did their White counterparts. We also found ethnic differences in women in the prevalence of long-term attempted weight loss; White women were nearly 60% more likely than Black women to report that they had been trying to lose weight for a year or more. Black women reported lower achieved weight losses than did White women, which was also observed in earlier studies.^{29,30} After we adjusted for duration, however, the rate of weight loss for Black and White women was identical. Taken together, our findings do not suggest that Black or Hispanic women are markedly different from White women in their weight loss behavior.

Although 39 states and the District of Columbia were included in the sample, this survey was not designed to represent the US population. The sample was also limited to telephone-owning households; although only about 4% to 7% of US households do not own telephones, weight control practices may differ depending on telephone ownership. This sampling bias may be particularly important for ethnic minorities, for whom telephone ownership is lower than in the general population.³¹ We know of no study that has examined differences in weight control practices between persons from households with and without telephones. Previous studies have generally reported that there are only modest differences in other health practices between persons from households with telephones and those without telephones.^{31,32}

This study had a survey nonresponse rate of 18%. In a study of nonrespondents to a general-topic telephone survey, however, it was found that the survey’s population estimates were only slightly altered by including data collected from the initial nonrespondents.³³ In addition, a recent study of the BRFSS found no statistically significant differences in the mean BMI or in the prevalence of current weight loss attempts between initial responders and nonresponders.³⁴

A related issue is that of item nonresponse, which was highest for the question on weight at the start of the weight loss attempt (see Figure 1). It may be that those who had very high weights were less willing to answer this question because of embarrassment, or because they were unsuccessful at losing weight. If this was true, then our estimates of mean starting weights may be too low. Differential item nonresponse may also account for the similarity in achieved weight loss between long-term and short-term dieters. For long-term dieters, nearly 23% of starting weights were missing, compared with 10% for short-term dieters. Hence, our estimates of achieved weight loss must be viewed cautiously.

In this study weight and height were self-reported. Self-reports produce downwardly biased estimates of overweight,³⁵ and this bias may be greater in telephone surveys.³⁶ Hence, some persons were probably misclassified in lower BMI categories. Past body weight is generally reported with reasonable accuracy, even

when the recall period is as long as 40 years.^{37,38} We believe, however, that persons who are attempting to lose weight are more likely than the general population to know their current and previous weights.

Our study suggests that nearly one of every three adults in the United States is currently trying to lose weight, making voluntary weight loss one of the most common health-related practices in the United States today. Although more than \$30 billion is spent annually on weight loss,³⁹ the long-term health effects of weight loss remain unclear.^{40,41} Thus, it is important to provide better information to the public health community about this poorly understood but highly prevalent practice. □

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