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## Weigh In

### **Why I Want to Answer this Question/Understand this Topic**

All my life, I have been burdened by my metabolism. Ever since I was a child, I would be hungry almost all the time. I eat every three hours, and it feels like I haven't eaten all day. I am constantly snacking between meals, and half of my food budget is spent on quick, portable meals. Have you ever gotten hungry in the middle of eating? I have. I have experienced more than one intervention concerning my weight, and my family blames my way of life. They believe I have an eating disorder and I almost believe them. I am very short, only 4 ft 11 inches tall, so the fluctuation of only one or two pounds is cause for alarm. In the past 2 weeks, I have lost 8 pounds, despite my best efforts otherwise. I weigh only 75 pounds, and only a few months ago I was 89 pounds.

That's right. In a country overrun by obese people obsessed with weight loss, I want to gain weight. I will eat a bottle of glue with every taco if that's what it takes to make them stick. That may not be the most effective method, but it's not like I've gotten much better advice. My friends are jealous of my body and my metabolism and they are not helpful. Well, I'm jealous of theirs. I am so skinny, that if I go for three hours without eating, I am dizzy. If I wait just a few hours longer than that, I will pass out. Faint. Like a waif. I am too underweight to donate blood or plasma. Yes, I am so small I don't have extra blood!

### **What I Already Know (and don't Know) about my Topic**

I have had a total of two interventions in my life for eating disorders I do not have—first for bulimia, then for anorexia. I am well learned in the warning signs and eating habits of bulimia and anorexia sufferers. A visit to a nutritionist was even apart of the first “intervention.” I don't like

nutritionists. I was given worksheets to meticulously count calories and pushed at meals to eat portions that were uncomfortably large, because of the nutritionist. This was an extremely negative experience that also was unfortunately tied to the more negative experience of being accused of having an eating disorder. Twice.

What else do I know? I know a great deal about healthy weight loss. This is because, as a child, my mother was overweight and determined to lose it. On the topic of weight gain, however, I am dismayed to find a severe lack of enthusiasm. Majority rules, and the majority is fat. Where are small, skinny, little people like me to go when we want a healthy, high-calorie snack? “Oh, you can just eat a cheeseburger from McDonald's every day, you'll gain weight,” My friends tell me. That is not healthy weight gain. That is beat-your-body-into-subdual weight gain. I know what foods contain what vitamins and minerals a body needs, how many calories a body needs each day, how to cook healthy meals, how much physical activity the average person needs each day to stay healthy, blah, blah, blah. There is so much to know about how to properly treat our bodies, and I know a great deal about maintaining a healthy weight. That's the key word: maintain. The problem is that I don't know how to get up to there, whereas most people work hard to get down to there.

### **Story of the Search**

I start my research and realize I have no clue where to start. This can only lead to one thing. Google. I keep it short, “healthy weight gain,” in the hopes of casting a large net and dragging back a few choice words or topics that I can properly gut later. I browse site after site and every time there is the simple “consume more calories”--sometimes worded differently, maybe explained (calories are in food, eat more food), but always present. Like this problem has such a plain-as-day obvious solution that the only people actually researching it are those who don't know how to operate their mouths.

I take a break from trying to find solutions on the internet and put my search on pause, frustrated by the lack of good leads. Standing outside the classroom one day, some fliers are brought to my attention. One advertises nutrition counseling, and the other advertises a Yoga-type event. The date

for the event had passed, but they are promising signs—here at UNI there is some department, group, club, or organization that knows something about healthy eating. I visit UNI's Wellness and Recreation Services website, looking for leads. They advertise an intuitive eating workshop and a list of links for healthy eating resources.

I select the link that promises to inform me of my individual calorie needs. This choice seems to make the most sense considering the overwhelming response to my question appears to be “eat more!” Its time to see exactly what I should be eating. After clicking on a personalized daily food plan for me and filling in my stats in the boxes: height, weight, gender, age; it gives me a warning message. Warning, you are underweight. I did not know this! Thank you, health website! It was even thoughtful enough to offer me 2 options for daily food plans: maintain current weight, or gradually gain weight. I chose the latter and it comes up with an impressively informative chart of food categories and serving sizes. Using this sheet, I could compare what I ate the past week with what the chart says I should eat, and change my eating patterns accordingly. In fact, I even have a couple days to try out the new diet, and grocery day is coming up! This is exciting.

I go grocery shopping armed with a list of healthy, snacky foods and ingredients for two meals. I notice that a lot of healthy food is very expensive, and healthy snack foods are even harder on the budget. I can only afford to pick up two healthy snack foods—peanuts and craisins. My plan is to mix them with my remaining cereal and saltines into some sort of semi-healthy hobo trail-mix.

While grocery shopping for my new diet, I had to use the restroom. Hyvee is strange in the way that it is one of those places that likes to post bulletins to the toilet stall's door. This bulletin included an advertisement for a nutrition event at Hyvee tomorrow. Its a \$5 fee to attend, but they'll give out samples of the recipes they cook! That takes a lot of the guesswork out of trying new recipes, and I hate spending an afternoon trying to cook some concoction only to waste all my time and ingredients on a flop. I make plans to attend.

At the event, a lot of stuff that they made was good, but I would not have the time or money to

make it on my own. I took home one of Hyvee's "Meal Ideas" pamphlets, but about half of the meals on it requires pork or fish – expensive to buy and time consuming to cook. I am disappointed by how expensive this new diet is looking.

I am eager to fit the extra calories into my diet, so I look for alternative solutions that would be easier to fit into my budget. GNC is a store in the college square mall that sells vitamins and supplements for all sorts of things. I drop in hoping to find something that is the equivalent of a meal in a pill, and GNC employee Luke is happy, if not a little confused, to help me find something. It is a very strange sight to see a short, 80 lb girl examining containers of protein shake powder and muscle-building juice larger than her torso—cardboard cut-outs of flexing, beefy, topless men crowding the back corner of the store. Luke has some good advice like mixing the powder with milk for an extra calorie boost, eating a meal before bedtime so your body doesn't burn your fat cells while you sleep, and eating 4-5 meals throughout the day. I took his advice to heart, keeping in mind, of course, that his job is to sell stuff in the store.

The supplement I would need to buy to add calories into my daily intake is the same stuff used by body builders to help build muscle mass. The stuff can come in cans or in powder form that you mix yourself into milkshakes. A can of it cost about \$5, and a giant container of the powder says it mixes about a dozen shakes, and it cost close to \$50. So, I don't buy anything.

### **What I learned**

From general internet resources, I learned a great deal about health hazards that can result from being underweight. For example: Vitamin deficiency, low energy levels, anemia, osteoporosis, cessation of menstruation and infertility, and weakened immune system. The cause behind most of these is the lack of essential vitamins and minerals present in food. This makes a lot of sense, because food is the primary source of energy for your body.

The Healthy Eating website through UNI Wellness and Recreation Services was the most educational. I benefited from .pdf files pages long of recipes that take only a few minutes to prepare

and can be easily modified to include more calories. The link that led to the American Heart Association website told me about the different kinds of fats in foods, and which ones are better for you than others. Monosaturated and Polysaturated fats are healthy fats and are present in foods such as vegetable oils, fish, peanut butter, and certain nuts and seeds. According to their website, “All fats are equally high in calories,” so I can eat the healthier kinds of fats without sacrificing a vital source of caloric intake. This was very influential in my choice of peanuts for a snack food.

The American Heart Association website was a very good resource, but they are definitely focused on weight-loss. I needed a personalized plan for serving sizes for gaining weight, which I obtained from the government website, [mypyramid.gov](http://mypyramid.gov). It said that each day I need to consume 6 ounces of grains, 2.5 cups of vegetables, 2 cups of fruits, 3 cups of milk, 6 teaspoons of oils, and 5.5 ounces of meat and/or beans. I found out two things from these portion sizes. Number one, I am lactose intolerant. Number two, these units are a lot more than they sound. Well, they are to me because I'm so small.

My biggest problem maintaining my weight seems to be that I am always on the go. I grab quick snacks that I can stuff in my backpack to eat later, and I don't always choose well. They are high in calories, yes, but they are also high in sugars and saturated or trans fats—the dreaded empty calories. Empty because they will not stay with me, I might as well be eating a sugar-spun air bubble. What I need are foods that will stick around after I've stopped running around. That's where I got the idea to mix my cereal and snack cakes with my peanuts and raisins. After the first day of eating my hobo trail-mix, I felt better. It is difficult to describe, but I felt like I had energy all day. When I got hungry, I would munch on a few peanuts and feel better again, instead of eating half a bag of cereal and feeling no difference.

I wish it was as easy to replace my main meals with the healthy meals. The recipes available at Hyvee and online obviously did not have poor college students in mind as their audience. I need recipes that can be prepared in 30 minutes or less, cooked in 30 minutes or less, preserved for 1 week, and

reheated in 60 seconds time in the microwave. Turkey and chicken are the kings of my meat category, with beans and rice as their squires. On rare occasions, beef will visit and grace my diet with its presence, but it never sticks around. Eggs are a cheap source of protein, but I cannot stand the smell of eggs cooking. Few things in the world bother me like the stench of a frying egg. My roommates love them, and even showed me how you could microwave a raw egg and it will come out cooked as if you scrambled it—I wanted to vomit.

Despite my inability to find new recipes that strictly follow my new weight-gain diet, I believe my current recipes will suffice. Give me turkey or chicken, and I can spout off a dozen healthy ways to cook them up. I just need to carve time out of my schedule to cook.

Mostly, I found out that the majority of people I talk to about my weight problems are unhelpful. If I want to gain weight, the proper advice isn't "eat a twinkie" or "eat more," but to select foods that are super-packed for high energy. Foods rich in the polysaturated and monosaturated fats, carbohydrates, and protein will be the most helpful. And I am confident that the tips I gained from my research will help make the food stick. If I work my way up to the portion sizes on the worksheet, and use the quick recipes to make better snacks, or maybe even save for some of the protein shake powder for a little push, then I am certain I can gain enough weight to have blood to spare.

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