

The weight reduction service organised by the Health Promotion Department, Malta

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The very first participants of the weight reduction programme organised by the Health Promotion Department did so in 1995. This was a key breakthrough in services provided free by the national health service whereby a key risk factor to the most prevalent non-communicable diseases (NCD's) is tackled directly by motivating patients to lose excess weight over a period of eight weeks.

The programme proved successful and popular from the start. The pilot group had been run in conjunction with Naxxar Local council and subsequent groups were then held in the various health centers around Malta and Gozo. The programme has attracted persons who are either self-referred or advised to do so by their family doctor or any other health professional.

The philosophy of the programme

The programme is one of its kind due to its design which utilizes the cognitive behaviour model established by Prochaska and DiClemente in 1984 and clearly explained in the following paper by Magro.

Throughout the eight weeks patients are taken through the programme and at each stage the individual progress is reported to enable the facilitator to monitor outcomes and advice accordingly.

The design of the programme

The programme encourages changes in lifestyle by focusing on the role of healthy balanced meals, regular exercise and coping with day-to-day stressors that in many instances lead to binges on high calorie foods. Participants are weighed individually over eight weekly instances and an individual calorie reduced diet is explained to them with key goals for realistic weight loss. Participants are in their greater majority placed on one of two diets depending on gender and the extent of their obesity, namely 1,200 Kcal or 1,500 Kcal respectively for females and males.

Throughout the course, skills necessary to maintain a healthy weight are taught. The programme is run in groups of 20 people maximum and through group work patients are encouraged by the facilitator to motivate each other and give the necessary psychological support.

One does note that this programme is ideal for those persons willing to discuss their weight, health and lifestyle with other persons however it is discouraged in the morbidly obese (ie BMI>40) or persons who have a medical history that does not allow participation in such a programme eg.eating disorders. Furthermore persons younger than 25 are not allowed to attend.

Each group is assigned a health care professional who has been specifically trained to facilitate the programme and to assist these persons in losing an appropriate amount of weight to improve their health.

What results are to be expected?

It is estimated that each person who follows the diet and exercises for at least 30 minutes three times weekly, an average weight loss of 3.5kg throughout the eight weeks is to be expected. However this is also dependent on the starting weight of the person and the adherence to the diet in the absence of any metabolic or endocrinologic problem.

Who can apply and how?

Prospective participants can either call the Health Promotion Department on 23 26 6000 and ask for this service or alternatively download an application from the www.sahha.gov.mt website. All particulars are to be filled and the application will be acknowledged on receipt. Applicants will be informed of the next session starting within their locality.

What do participants say?

Evaluation sheets filled by the participants in the last session of the programme are filled with positive comments.

Many comment that they wish the programme to continue for more weeks and others find that the motivation acquired throughout the programme is also helping all the family to eat well and adopt a healthier lifestyle. The majority comment that their knowledge on food and health has improved greatly following the programme. In general the programme is in popular demand by the general public and some show the desire of repeating the programme to sustain their weight loss.