

Understanding Health At Every Size® (HAES)

A Compassionate Approach to Health and Wellbeing

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What is Health At Every Size (HAES)?

Health At Every Size® (HAES) is an inclusive, evidence-based approach to health and wellbeing that recognizes health is not determined by body weight or size. Developed as an alternative to weight-focused health paradigms, HAES shifts the focus from weight loss to health-promoting behaviors that people can adopt regardless of their body size.

HAES challenges the assumption that weight is a direct indicator of health and rejects the idea that weight loss should be pursued as a primary health goal. Instead, it promotes respect for body diversity, encourages intuitive self-care, and addresses the social determinants of health.

Key Concepts:

- **Weight-Inclusive:** Health is possible at every size; bodies naturally come in diverse shapes and sizes
- **Evidence-Based:** Supported by scientific research showing weight-focused interventions often cause harm
- **Compassionate:** Respects individuals' autonomy and lived experiences
- **Social Justice-Oriented:** Addresses weight stigma, discrimination, and health inequities

Why HAES Matters

Traditional weight-focused approaches to health have significant limitations and can cause harm:

Problems with Weight-Focused Healthcare:

- **Weight loss is not sustainable:** 95-98% of diets fail long-term, and most people regain the weight (often more)
- **Weight cycling harms health:** Yo-yo dieting is associated with increased health risks
- **BMI is flawed:** Body Mass Index was never intended as an individual health measure and doesn't account for body composition, muscle mass, or metabolic health
- **Weight stigma causes harm:** Discrimination and bias lead to psychological distress, eating disorders, and avoidance of healthcare
- **Correlation ≠ causation:** Many conditions correlated with higher weight may be caused by weight stigma, weight cycling, or shared underlying factors—not weight itself
- **Healthcare disparities:** People in larger bodies often receive delayed diagnoses because providers attribute all symptoms to weight

What Research Shows:

Studies demonstrate that health-promoting behaviors (like regular movement, balanced nutrition, stress management, and adequate sleep) improve health outcomes regardless of whether weight changes. Additionally, weight stigma—not weight itself—is independently associated with many negative health outcomes.

The Five HAES Principles

The Association for Size Diversity and Health (ASDAH) outlines five core principles of HAES:

1. Weight Inclusivity

Accept and respect the inherent diversity of body shapes and sizes and reject the idealizing or pathologizing of specific weights.

What This Means:

- All bodies deserve respect, dignity, and access to quality healthcare
- Body diversity is natural and normal—there is no 'ideal' body size
- Health can exist across the entire weight spectrum
- Rejecting weight-based discrimination and bias
- Understanding that genetics, environment, and many factors influence body size

In Practice:

- Healthcare providers offer the same quality care regardless of patient size
- Medical offices have appropriately sized equipment (chairs, gowns, blood pressure cuffs)
- Challenging assumptions that thinner is always healthier
- Recognizing thin privilege and working to dismantle weight-based hierarchies

2. Health Enhancement

Support health policies that improve and equalize access to information and services, and personal practices that improve human well-being, including attention to individual physical, economic, social, spiritual, emotional, and other needs.

What This Means:

- Health is multidimensional—not just physical, but emotional, social, spiritual, and economic
- Focus on health-promoting behaviors rather than weight outcomes
- Address social determinants of health (poverty, discrimination, access to resources)
- Recognize that health is not entirely within individual control
- Health is a resource for living, not a moral obligation

In Practice:

- Supporting behaviors like joyful movement, varied nutrition, stress management, and sleep
- Advocating for universal healthcare access
- Creating inclusive fitness spaces and movement opportunities
- Addressing systemic barriers to health (food insecurity, unsafe neighborhoods, lack of healthcare)
- Recognizing that health status doesn't determine a person's worth

3. Respectful Care

Acknowledge our biases, and work to end weight discrimination, weight stigma, and weight bias. Provide information and services from an understanding that socioeconomic status, race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and other identities impact weight stigma, and support environments that address these inequities.

What This Means:

- Weight stigma and discrimination cause significant psychological and physical harm
- Everyone, including healthcare providers, has internalized weight bias that must be examined
- Weight stigma is intertwined with racism, sexism, classism, and other oppressions
- Creating safe, respectful environments for people of all sizes
- Centering the voices and experiences of people in larger bodies

In Practice:

- Using neutral, respectful language (avoiding terms like 'obese')
- Not assuming health status based on appearance
- Challenging weight-based jokes, comments, and discrimination
- Examining personal biases through training and self-reflection
- Advocating for anti-discrimination policies that include weight/size

- Understanding how weight stigma particularly impacts marginalized communities

4. Eating for Well-being

Promote flexible, individualized eating based on hunger, satiety, nutritional needs, and pleasure, rather than any externally regulated eating plan focused on weight control.

What This Means:

- Encouraging intuitive, attuned eating rather than rigid dieting
- Rejecting food moralization (no 'good' or 'bad' foods)
- Honoring hunger, fullness, and satisfaction cues
- Recognizing that nutrition is important, but so are pleasure and cultural connection
- Understanding that eating patterns are influenced by many factors beyond individual choice

In Practice:

- Learning to trust internal body signals
- Eating a variety of foods without guilt
- Considering nutrition information without rigidity or fear
- Honoring cultural food traditions and preferences
- Recognizing barriers to food access (cost, availability, time)
- Rejecting diet culture messaging

Connection to Intuitive Eating:

This principle aligns closely with Intuitive Eating, a framework that helps people develop a healthy relationship with food by honoring hunger, making peace with food, and respecting their bodies.

5. Life-Enhancing Movement

Support physical activities that allow people of all sizes, abilities, and interests to engage in enjoyable movement, to the degree that they choose.

What This Means:

- Movement should be joyful and accessible, not punitive or compensatory
- Rejecting exercise as a weight loss tool or punishment for eating
- All bodies are worthy of moving in ways that feel good
- Movement is a personal choice—not an obligation
- Focus on how movement feels rather than calories burned

In Practice:

- Finding movement that is enjoyable and sustainable
- Creating inclusive fitness spaces with equipment for all body sizes
- Offering diverse movement options (dance, walking, yoga, swimming, etc.)
- Respecting rest and recovery as essential
- Honoring that some people cannot or choose not to exercise—and that's okay
- Celebrating what bodies can do rather than how they look

Common Misconceptions About HAES

There are many misunderstandings about what HAES does and doesn't mean. Let's address some common myths:

Myth #1: HAES means health doesn't matter

Truth: HAES absolutely values health! It simply recognizes that health is complex, multifaceted, and not determined by weight alone. HAES promotes health-supporting behaviors for people of all sizes.

Myth #2: HAES says everyone is equally healthy at any weight

Truth: HAES recognizes that people across the weight spectrum can be healthy OR unhealthy. It doesn't claim everyone is equally healthy—it says weight alone doesn't determine health status. HAES acknowledges that some people in larger bodies have health conditions, just as some people in smaller bodies do. The key is that health-promoting behaviors benefit everyone, regardless of weight outcomes.

Myth #3: HAES promotes fat bodies

Truth: HAES doesn't promote any particular body size. It promotes body diversity and rejects the stigmatization of any body size. HAES recognizes that intentional weight loss attempts are largely unsuccessful and can cause harm, so it focuses on sustainable health behaviors instead.

Myth #4: HAES ignores medical research about weight and health

Truth: HAES is based on extensive scientific research. It critically examines weight science and recognizes that many studies show correlation (not causation) between weight and health conditions. HAES considers the impacts of weight stigma, weight cycling, poverty, and other factors that research shows significantly affect health outcomes.

Myth #5: HAES means you can't lose weight

Truth: HAES doesn't prohibit weight loss—it simply doesn't make weight loss a goal. If someone's weight changes as a result of health-promoting behaviors, that's okay. HAES opposes intentional weight loss dieting because research shows it's largely ineffective and can cause physical and psychological harm.

Myth #6: HAES is just giving up

Truth: HAES is actually more demanding than weight-focused approaches because it requires examining biases, challenging cultural norms, and committing to sustainable behavior change. It's a shift from controlling the body to caring for the body—which takes courage and persistence.

HAES and Eating Disorder Recovery

HAES principles are particularly valuable in eating disorder treatment and recovery:

Why HAES Supports Recovery:

- **Removes focus on weight:** Weight restoration/stabilization can occur without making weight the primary measure of recovery
- **Reduces body checking and comparison:** All bodies are worthy, reducing the urge to compare or achieve a certain size
- **Supports intuitive eating:** Learning to honor internal cues rather than external diet rules
- **Challenges ED thoughts:** HAES directly contradicts eating disorder beliefs about weight and health
- **Addresses weight stigma:** Much eating disorder behavior is rooted in fear of weight gain and internalized fatphobia
- **Promotes body respect:** Even when body acceptance feels impossible, HAES encourages body respect

HAES-Aligned Recovery Means:

- Eating adequately to support physical and mental health
- Engaging in movement that feels good, not compensatory exercise
- Focusing on how the body feels rather than how it looks
- Challenging diet culture and weight stigma
- Trusting that the body will settle at its natural weight with normalized eating
- Recognizing health is multidimensional—physical, mental, emotional, social

How to Implement HAES Principles in Your Life

Adopting a HAES approach is a journey, especially in a culture saturated with diet messaging. Here are practical ways to begin:

1. Examine Your Biases

- Reflect on your own beliefs about weight, health, and body size
- Notice when you make assumptions about someone's health based on their appearance
- Challenge negative thoughts about your own body or others' bodies
- Learn about weight stigma and its impacts

2. Shift Focus from Weight to Wellbeing

- Stop weighing yourself
- Remove the scale from your home
- Focus on how your body feels rather than how it looks or what it weighs
- Measure health by energy levels, mood, strength, and other non-weight markers

3. Reject Diet Culture

- Stop dieting and pursuing intentional weight loss
- Unfollow social media accounts that promote dieting or 'ideal' bodies
- Challenge diet talk when you hear it from others
- Recognize that 'wellness culture' and 'clean eating' are often diets in disguise

4. Practice Intuitive Eating and Joyful Movement

- Learn to honor your hunger and fullness cues
- Give yourself unconditional permission to eat all foods
- Find forms of movement that feel good in your body
- Separate exercise from food—movement is not punishment for eating

5. Advocate for Change

- Speak up against weight-based discrimination
- Request weight-inclusive care from healthcare providers
- Support policies that protect people from size discrimination
- Amplify the voices of people in larger bodies and HAES advocates

6. Practice Body Respect (Even When Acceptance Feels Far Away)

- You don't have to love your body to treat it with respect
- Care for your body through rest, nourishment, and movement
- Wear clothes that fit and feel comfortable now
- Challenge negative self-talk

Finding HAES-Aligned Healthcare Providers

Working with healthcare providers who embrace HAES principles can significantly improve your care experience and outcomes. Here's how to find weight-inclusive practitioners:

Questions to Ask Potential Providers:

- "Do you practice from a Health At Every Size or weight-inclusive framework?"
- "Can I opt out of being weighed, or be weighed blind (without knowing the number)?"
- "How do you approach health concerns in patients of different sizes?"
- "Do you recommend weight loss? If so, in what circumstances?"
- "How do you support patients with a history of eating disorders?"

Red Flags to Watch For:

- Attributing all symptoms to weight without proper examination
- Recommending weight loss as the first-line treatment
- Making assumptions about your health based on appearance
- Using shame or scare tactics about weight
- Dismissing your concerns or lived experience

Where to Find HAES Providers:

- Association for Size Diversity and Health (ASDAH): sizediversityandhealth.org
- HAES Community Resources: haescommunity.com
- National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) provider database
- Ask for referrals from HAES-aligned providers you trust

Resources for Learning More

To deepen your understanding of HAES, explore these evidence-based resources:

Organizations:

- **Association for Size Diversity and Health (ASDAH):** sizediversityandhealth.org
- **HAES Community:** haescommunity.com
- **National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA):** naafa.org

Books:

- **"Health At Every Size"** by Lindo Bacon, PhD
- **"Body Respect"** by Lindo Bacon, PhD and Lucy Aphramor, PhD, RD
- **"Anti-Diet"** by Christy Harrison, MPH, RD
- **"The Body Is Not an Apology"** by Sonya Renee Taylor
- **"Intuitive Eating"** by Evelyn Tribole, MS, RDN and Elyse Resch, MS, RDN
- **"Body Kindness"** by Rebecca Scritchfield, RDN
- **"Fearing the Black Body"** by Sabrina Strings, PhD (on weight stigma's racist roots)
- **"If Your Hunger Could Talk"** by Anne Cuthbert, MA, LPC, LMHC

Podcasts:

- **Food Psych** with Christy Harrison
- **Maintenance Phase** with Aubrey Gordon and Michael Hobbes
- **Comfort Food** with Shannon K

Research & Scientific Articles:

- Bacon, L. & Aphramor, L. (2011). Weight science: Evaluating the evidence for a paradigm shift. *Nutrition Journal*
- Tylka, T.L. et al. (2014). The weight-inclusive versus weight-normative approach to health. *Journal of Obesity*
- Tomiyama, A.J. et al. (2018). How and why weight stigma drives the obesity 'epidemic' and harms health. *BMC Medicine*

Conclusion

Health At Every Size represents a paradigm shift in how we think about health, wellness, and body size. By focusing on health-promoting behaviors rather than weight outcomes, HAES offers a more compassionate, sustainable, and evidence-based approach to wellbeing.

HAES is particularly valuable for eating disorder recovery, as it directly challenges the weight-focused beliefs that often fuel disordered eating. It creates space for all bodies to be respected and cared for, regardless of size.

Adopting HAES principles is a journey that takes time, especially in a culture that profits from weight stigma and diet culture. Be patient with yourself as you unlearn harmful beliefs and practice new ways of relating to your body and health.

Remember:

- Your body deserves respect at any size
- Health is complex and not entirely within your control
- You are worthy of care, compassion, and dignity—always
- Challenging diet culture is an act of resistance and self-care
- Recovery and wellbeing are possible at every size

For more resources and support, visit:

beyondeatingrecovery.com/resources

All bodies are good bodies. ■