

Why your body refuses to lose weight

For some people, weight loss is not just about diet and exercise. Experts say the body can adapt over time to defend a higher weight, making shedding kilos slower, harder, and more complex than many expect.

BY TONY MUSHOBOROZI

The question is simple, but the science behind it is not. Can someone who has been overweight since childhood lose weight as an adult? The evidence from decades of research points to a clear answer: yes, but with important caveats about difficulty, biology, and long-term outcomes.

In the US, a country riddled with weight problems, a large systematic review of cohort studies by the National Centre for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) found "substantial evidence...that childhood obesity typically persists into adulthood".

Another meta-analysis reached a striking conclusion: "Obese children and adolescents were around five times more likely to be obese in adulthood."

It goes without saying that many people have had weight struggles since childhood, and for these people, the big question is: Is there hope? Is it possible to lose weight when you have been obese since childhood? According to dietitian Ivan Philip Baguma, the founder and lead nutritionist at Amicable Nutritionist, the answer is yes.

"It is absolutely possible for someone who has struggled with weight since childhood to achieve sustainable weight loss in adulthood. While the journey involves navigating unique biological and psychological factors, adulthood offers the advantage of conscious decision-making and access to more diverse health tools," he says.

Baguma says that while childhood weight patterns can influence the number of fat cells (adipocytes) or the "set point" of metabolism, the body remains adaptable and open to weight loss. In his experience, success in adulthood often comes from shifting the focus away from "restrictive dieting" and toward metabolic restoration and sustainable lifestyle shifts.

Why weight loss can be slower

While weight loss is possible, research suggests it may be more difficult for those who have been obese since early life. An Ontime study examined how early-life obesity affects adult weight loss outcomes. It found that individuals with higher levels of childhood obesity had a reduced response to treatment. In other words, their bodies were less responsive to standard interventions.

Although the study is technical, its implication is straightforward: weight loss still occurs, but the magnitude and speed may be reduced. This aligns



Julie Matsiko before and after her weight loss journey. After struggling with weight since childhood, she has lost over 25kg through sustained lifestyle changes, moving from triple-digit weight to a healthier range while continuing her transformation. PHOTO/COURTESY

with clinical observations that long-term obesity often requires more sustained and structured approaches.

Unique challenges

Individuals who have struggled since childhood often face hurdles that those who gained weight later in life do not, according to dietitian Baguma. One of the unique challenges is what he calls the biological "set point". The body may work harder to defend a higher weight because it has been the "norm" for decades.

"The other unique challenge is psychological scripting. Food is often deeply tied to childhood rewards, punishments, or coping mechanisms, making the emotional uncoupling of

food much more complex for people who have struggled with weight since childhood," Baguma says.

Baguma has been helping such people lose weight at his clinic, Amicable. One such person is Julie Matsiko. She has struggled with weight since childhood. Today, in her 40s, an age when it is often hardest to lose weight, she has managed to lose more than 25kg. She says she was once in triple-digit readings, now she is down to double digits and reducing further still. Baguma says Matsiko's experience underscores the importance of a holistic approach.

"By incorporating nutrient-dense foods and mindful practices such as not being too hard on herself, being patient with herself while believing



PRACTICAL STEPS FOR LONG-TERM WEIGHT LOSS

Losing weight after years of struggle is possible, but it requires a structured, sustainable approach rather than quick fixes.

● **Build meals around whole foods:** Prioritise vegetables, legumes, lean proteins, and high-fibre foods to improve fullness and stabilise blood sugar.

● **Strength training matters:** Add resistance exercises to build muscle, which helps boost metabolism over time.

● **Focus on consistency, not restriction:** Avoid extreme diets that are hard to maintain and often lead to rebound weight gain.

● **Understand emotional eating:** Identify triggers linked to stress, boredom, or childhood habits and replace them with healthier coping strategies.

● **Support gut health:** Include fermented foods and varied fibre sources to improve digestion and metabolic balance.

● **Track progress beyond the scale:** Monitor energy levels, sleep, and fitness improvements as key indicators of success. Experts say the goal is not rapid weight loss, but long-term metabolic and lifestyle change.

in long-term effects of exercise, and her strong faith in God, she was able to overcome lifelong weight challenges," Baguma says.

The same approach to food and exercise helps people who gain weight as adults. One such case is Philip Katahoire. He was 109kg in 2023. He lost 17kg to reach his current weight of 92kg. At 69, he had been struggling with health issues for 40 years. He regained his health and improved his blood pressure using diet and regular exercise.

Katahoire says he has regained his energy and emphasises that the process was about restoring health rather than following a restrictive diet.

Strategic approaches

For those with a lifelong struggle, traditional "eat less, move more"

advice often falls short because it ignores long-term metabolic history. According to Baguma, better strategies include the following:

Prioritising whole foods that manage insulin levels such as non-starchy vegetables and high-fibre foods. Building lean muscle through resistance training helps increase the basal metabolic rate, which may have been suppressed by years of yo-yo dieting.

Addressing the gut microbiome, as long-term weight struggles are often linked to gut health. This is done by incorporating diverse fibres and fermented foods to help recalibrate the internal environment. And lastly, mindful and intuitive eating by learning to distinguish between emotional triggers developed in childhood and true physiological hunger.

NOTE
EAT WHOLE FOODS
TO MANAGE
INSULIN LEVELS