

# A Stress-Lowering Approach to Weight Loss

## Knoxville Woman Finds Support at Fort Sanders Weight Management Center

People sometimes joke they're allergic to stress, but for Michelle Watkins, 42, it's the honest truth.

"I'm really and truly allergic to stress. Stress is my main mediator," says Watkins, a special education teacher in North Knoxville.

Watkins has an immune disorder related to mast cells in her body's immune system. Mast cells release substances called "mediators" in response to danger, stress, or allergens such as foods and pollen.

Three years ago Watkins found herself facing not only the daily stress of being a single mom and a teacher, but also grief over the death of a loved one. "The stress hit me emotionally and physically. I had heart palpitations, hives, and even new allergic reactions to foods.

"Eventually, I was having all these crazy anaphylactic reactions. I had scalp tingling. I was throwing up. I lost my voice. It was scary," she says.

Watkins was eventually diagnosed with mast cell activation syndrome (MCAS) and was found to be allergic to at least a dozen foods in addition to stress itself.

"When I first got diag-

nosed with the mast cell issue, I started taking a daily antihistamine and I lost 25 pounds quickly. Then I lost 10 more pounds on my own. I was always healthy. I ran the Covenant Health Knoxville Marathon, and I was exercising and regularly working out. But my weight had hit this wall and wasn't going down," Watkins says.

"I was hoping if I could eliminate more of the physical stress [of extra weight] from my body, my immune disorder would improve," she recalls.

At the recommendation of a fellow teacher, Watkins contacted the Fort Sanders Weight Management and Nutrition Center. The center specializes in a medically supervised approach to weight loss that offers each patient an individualized plan for diet, exercise, medication and even weight-loss surgery.

At the center, Watkins worked with Dana Webber, MSN, NP-C, CBN, a nurse practitioner and certified bariatric nurse. Webber designed a weight loss plan just for Watkins that addressed her unique health needs through diet, exercise and two medications.



After Michelle Watkins hit a wall in her weight loss due to an immune disorder, she turned to the Fort Sanders Weight Management and Nutrition Center for help.

"I count calories, and it's all about portion control. What Dana helped me understand is how my metabolism works," Watkins says. "As for the medications, I feel like it's just a tool. It settled down that part of my brain that makes me crave certain things. It definitely doesn't do it all for you, and it is not a

magic bullet.

"Before taking medication, if I were at school till 5:30 or 6 p.m., I would have to stop and pick up fast food on my way home. But now, it's not an emergency. I can go home and make a regular dinner," she said.

By the end of December 2019, Watkins had lost 60

pounds. Her goal is to lose 20 more and get back to what she weighed in college.

"I pack all my lunches for school. I typically walk about an hour a day, then I do yoga



Watkins is thankful for her experience at the Fort Sanders Weight Management and Nutrition Center. "I never felt bad before, but now I feel really, really good."

for an hour a day," she says. "I have been more stable with my immune disorder than I have been in three years. My allergist is very happy!"

Watkins recommends Fort Sanders Weight Management Center to anyone wanting to make a long-term healthy lifestyle change.

"It's an amazing place," she states. "The thing about Dana is that you know she understands where you're

coming from. She has been on a healthful living weight-loss path herself. Her empathy is tremendous."

"If you've never struggled with obesity, it's hard to understand," Webber says. "I've been there, and I get it. I never use the word 'diet,' because diets don't work. Most people have been on diets their whole lives, but gain weight when they go off them.

"Michelle was successful because she was ready to make the change. She followed up, and she comes to all of her appointments. The goals we've given her, she's knocked them out of the ballpark."

As for Watkins, she is adjusting to being back at school during a pandemic. If there was ever a time to use her stress-relieving strategies, it's now.

"This whole stress of going back to school has been hard, but I'm still seeing Dana," Watkins says. "I wish I would have started seeing her sooner. I never felt bad before, but now I feel really, really good."

To learn more about weight management options at Fort Sanders Regional, visit [FSRegional.com/Bariatrics](http://FSRegional.com/Bariatrics).

## Stress and Your Immune System: It's All Related

Your immune system is your body's defense against infections and other harmful invaders. Without it, you would constantly get sick from germs such as bacteria or viruses. When your immune system doesn't work the way it should, it is called an immune system disorder.

Immune system disorders can present themselves in a number of ways.

- **Primary immune deficiency:** being born with a weak immune system
- **Acquired immune deficiency:** acquiring a disease that weakens your immune system.
- **Autoimmune disease:** having an immune system that turns against you.
- **Overactive immune system:** potentially caused by an allergic reaction.

### Autoimmune Diseases

In autoimmune diseases, the body attacks normal, healthy tissues.

Some common autoimmune diseases are Type 1 diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus and thyroid disease. Autoimmune disorders affecting the thyroid include Graves' disease, where the body makes too much thyroid hormone (also known as hyperthyroidism), and Hashimoto's thyroiditis, where

it doesn't make enough of the hormone (hypothyroidism).

Experts don't know what causes autoimmune diseases, but many factors seem to be involved. If you have an immune system disorder, learn as much as you can about it and work closely with your health-care providers to manage it.

### A Note about Weight

Being overweight or obese raises your risk of developing rheumatoid arthritis or psoriatic arthritis. This could be because more weight puts greater stress on the joints or because fat tissue makes substances that encourage inflammation.

Having lupus, rheumatoid arthritis or psoriatic arthritis raises

your risk for heart disease. While taking steps to reduce heart disease is always a good idea, it is even more essential if you have one of these conditions.

Managing your weight by getting regular exercise and maintaining a balanced diet can not only make you feel better, but it can help you avoid developing more issues for your body to combat later.

### Try These Three Relaxation Methods

Everyone has stress and feels its effects. Long-term or chronic stress can raise the risk for heart disease, back pain, depression, constant muscle aches and pains and a weak immune system. It can also affect your emotions and behavior.

Research shows it is helpful to find and practice healthy ways to manage it. Try these methods for yourself.

- **Take a breath.** Start by sitting up straight. Breathe in so your

rib cage expands, and then breathe out slowly. Breathing in this way relaxes muscles and reduces tension. Focus on a word, a mantra or even your breath by focusing on your nostrils. Feel the breath coming in and going out. Try this for five to 10 minutes, twice a day.

- **Relax slowly.** Sit or lie down, if you can, and close your eyes. Starting at your head, tense your face by clenching your teeth and furrowing your brow. Hold the tension for five seconds, then release it. Next, tense your shoulders by bringing them up to your ears, then your arms. Continue to tighten and release each group of muscles in your body until you reach your toes. Focus on the warmth and heaviness of your body as you relax. Breathe gently for a few moments, then open your eyes.
- **Be patient.** Be patient with yourself and with this process. It's important to find a method that works for you on an ongoing basis, not just when your life is out of control. Doing this regularly can give you a place of calm to return to when the going gets rough.

To find a clinician to help with your overall health, use the Covenant Health online directory at [CovenantHealth.com/findaphysician](http://CovenantHealth.com/findaphysician), and choose Fort Sanders Regional Medical Center as your facility.

## Don't Weight Any Longer

Fort Sanders Regional Medical Center offers both surgical and non-surgical weight-loss options to our patients. Our staff is here to help you decide the option that is right for you and your weight loss goals.

