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By Beverley Rouse, PA Published: 10 April 2007.

Dieters end up Heavier.

Going on a diet is unlikely to lead to long-term weight loss, according to a new study. Researchers in California found people typically lose between five and 10 per cent of their starting weight during the first six months of a diet.

But the study found between a third and two-thirds of people who went on diets regained more weight than they had lost, within four or five years.

The study was carried out by researchers at UCLA, California's biggest university.

The report's lead author, UCLA associate professor of psychology Traci Mann, said: "We found that the majority of people regained all the weight, plus more.

"Sustained weight loss was found in only a small minority of participants, while complete loss regain was found in the majority.

"Diets do not lead to sustained weight loss or health benefits for the majority of people."

Researchers analysed 31 long-term studies that followed participants for two to five years.

Mann added: "We concluded most of them would have been better off not going on the diet at all. Their weight would have been pretty much the same, and their bodies would not suffer the wear and tear of losing weight and gaining it all back."

She said some diet studies relied on participants to report their weight rather than having it measured by an impartial source while others had low follow-up rates which made their results unrepresentative. She said this might make diets seem more effective than they really were as those who gained weight might be less likely to take part in the follow-ups.

Mann said in her opinion eating in moderation was a good idea for everybody as was regular exercise.

She added: "That is not what we looked at in this study. Exercise may well be the key factor leading to sustained weight loss.

"Studies consistently find that people who reported the most exercise also had the most weight loss."

Mann added: "My mother has been on diets and says what we are saying is obvious."

The study is published in this month's edition of American Psychologist, the journal of the American Psychological Association.