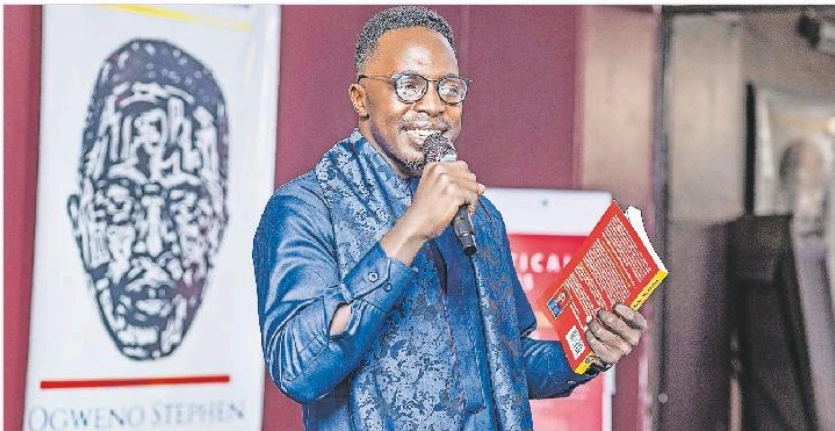


## Weight loss



Stephen Ogwen, the founder of Stowelink Foundation.  
PHOTO | POOL

## Metabolic symphony

# How Stephen lost 50 kilos and grew into an obesity advocate

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**HEALTH**  
**ESTHER**  
**INTABO**

Stephen Ogwen spent his childhood carrying a weight no one around him fully understood, not even himself. While his peers ran and played freely, he struggled with obesity, a condition that quietly shaped every part of his early life.

Relatives who picked the young Stephen up always had something to say about his size.

"I was always heavier than my peers. It was around Class Seven that I first realised my weight was a concern," says Stephen.

At the time, he weighed about 50 kilogrammes, while most boys his age averaged 30 kilogrammes. As his classmates entered adolescence, proudly showing off broader shoulders and muscles, Stephen felt left behind.

"They would showcase their muscles when all I had was a mass of fat. I was not developing masculine features," he recalls.

"The stigma and discrimination from my peers really affected my self-perception, but I found solace in beating them at schoolwork."

As early as Class Four, his body began showing signs of distress. He developed gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (GERD) and severe tooth decay, both conditions linked to obesity.

"That was when I knew that beyond appearance, my weight was beginning to affect my health," says the 30-year-old.

At his heaviest, Stephen weighed

nearly 120 kilogrammes. At his lightest as an adult, he dropped to 74 kilogrammes, yet even then, his Body Mass Index still fell within the overweight or Obesity Class One range. Altogether, he has shed over 50 kilogrammes, a journey he describes as anything but linear.

"Obesity is influenced by many factors, including lifestyle, environment, stress, biology, and access to health-care."

### The turning point

His turning point came in university, where he embraced a more structured lifestyle and a consistent exercise routine. He took up several sports, including handball and rugby, but resistance training made the most significant difference.

"While I sometimes gained weight during training, my body composition changed significantly with more muscle and less fat," he explains.

"My family hardly regarded obesity as a sickness. Rather, they considered me healthy. They didn't accept that I had GERD. They thought the constant regurgitation of food was a distasteful act I pulled for fun. I could get continuously nauseated and would not even sleep in certain positions."

Those experiences eventually shaped his career in population health. In 2016, he moved into public health,

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## Lifestyle

# 'Weight loss is a metabolic symphony involving calories, hormones, and lifestyle.'

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championing awareness of non-communicable diseases such as cancer and diabetes through community health programmes across Africa through his organisation, Stowelink Foundation. He also serves as a board member of the World Obesity Federation, which focuses on representing scientific, medical and research on obesity.

Over the years, Stephen experimented with various eating approaches, including vegan diets, though some left him feeling bloated. One of the most effective was a long-term carnivore-style diet centred on high protein intake.

"Combining high protein intake with resistance training helped improve my body composition significantly," he says.

In time, he evolved toward what he calls a modified carnivore approach, reintroducing vegetables and broadening his dietary variety. That balance, he says, helped him reduce body fat, improve satiety, and better manage his overall health.

### Metabolic symphony

Still, he cautions against reducing weight loss to a single nutrient.

"Weight loss is a metabolic symphony involving calories, hormones, and lifestyle," he says.

For him, the most effective routine combined high protein intake with intense resistance training and regular physical activity.

"I focused heavily on strength and weight-based exercises," he explains. "Building muscle helped improve my metabolism, fitness, and overall body composition."

He also notes that while men may consume larger absolute amounts of protein due to greater muscle mass, the most reliable guide remains protein intake per kilogramme of body weight.

One of the biggest misconceptions around high-protein diets, he says, is the assumption that they revolve around extreme "bodybuilder meals".

"I focused on balance and sustainability rather than extremes," he says.

Over time, he paired protein with vegetables, paid closer attention to portion sizes, and widened his dietary variety. He recommends prioritising lean, minimally processed protein sources. Plant-based options such as lentils, chickpeas, and beans offer added fibre that supports weight loss, while fish, poultry, and eggs are preferable to processed meats like sausages and deli

cuts, which tend to be high in sodium and saturated fat.

"The goal was not just weight loss, but building a healthier long-term lifestyle that I could realistically maintain," he says.

Even so, he reminds people that protein is not exempt from basic nutritional rules.

"At the end of the day, protein still has four calories per gramme. If you eat protein in excess of your daily energy needs, your body will store that excess energy as fat," he says, adding that there is no specific amount on a plate that can be equated, as people use different sizes of plates depending on the specific type of protein. For example, the concentration of protein in beef is higher than that of beans, though both are proteins.

He also warns that excessive protein without adequate fibre can trigger constipation, bloating, and sluggishness. Other signs of overconsumption may include dehydration; foamy urine linked to kidney stress; chronic constipation; fatigue; and hair loss, the result of neglecting fruits, vegetables, and healthy fats.

Protein's role in appetite regulation is another reason many find it useful during weight loss.

"Protein suppresses ghrelin, the hormone responsible for hunger, while boosting the fullness hormone," he explains. "Your body also uses more energy to digest protein than fats or carbohydrates, a process known as the thermic effect of food."

### Individualised protein intake

Dr Nicola Okech, a physician, endocrinologist and obesity medicine specialist at Uzwenza Health, agrees that protein plays a crucial role in both weight loss and long-term weight maintenance, primarily because it helps preserve muscle mass.

"Muscle burns fat even when not active," she says. "The more muscle one builds, the more weight is lost."

She cautions, however, that protein intake should always be individualised and guided by a doctor and a dietitian, as conditions like kidney disease may limit intake. An average adult's daily need for protein is 0.8 to 1.2 grammes per kilogramme of ideal body weight. For weight loss, this increases up to 1.8 grammes per kilogram of ideal body weight."

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