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OBESITY

Obesity is a term used to describe somebody who is very overweight due to a high degree of body fat.

Although body weight and weight gain are influenced by many factors, including people's genetic makeup and the environment in which they live, the individual decisions people make also affect whether they maintain a healthy weight. A person needs to be in 'energy balance' to maintain a healthy weight – that is, their energy intake (from food) should not exceed the energy expended through everyday activities and exercise.

People tend to gain weight gradually, and may not notice this happening. Many people accept weight gain with age as inevitable but the main cause is gradual changes in their everyday lives, such as a tendency to being less active, or small changes to diet. People also often gain weight during particular stages of their life, such as during and after pregnancy, the menopause or while stopping smoking.

Small, sustained improvements to daily habits can help people maintain a healthy weight and have wider health benefits – such as reducing the risks of diseases associated with obesity. But making changes can be difficult and is often hindered by conflicting advice on what changes to make.

Assessment for obesity¹

There are a number of ways to assess for obesity, and the most widely used methods are:

1. **Body mass index (BMI)** – this is weight in kilograms divided by height in meters squared. You can work out your own BMI using a [BMI calculator](#) and interpret the result as below.

BMI	Interpretation
Between 18.5 and 4.9	Healthy
Between 25 and 29.9	Overweight
Between 30 and 40	Obese
Over 40	Very obese (known as "morbidly obese")

2. **Waist measurement** - People with very fat waists (94cm or more in men and 80cm or more in women) are more likely to develop obesity-related health problems.

How many people are obese?

A UK survey published in 2012 found that just over a quarter of all adults (26%) in England are obese.

Causes of obesity

Most cases of obesity are caused by a person eating more calories than they burn off, and the unused calories being turned into fat. Modern lifestyles also do not help:

- there is easy access to cheap, high energy food that is often marketed aggressively



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- people's lifestyles and jobs are much less active than in the past – many leisure activities, such as watching television, playing video games and browsing the internet, are usually done sitting down
- people drive or use public transport and tend to walk a lot less than they used to

The risks of obesity

Being obese increases your risk of developing a number of serious and potentially life-threatening diseases, such as:

- type 2 diabetes
- heart disease
- some types of cancer, such as breast cancer and colon cancer
- stroke
- poor quality of life
- depression

Treatment of obesity

There is no "magic wand" treatment for obesity.

Multicomponent interventions are the treatment of choice.² Weight management programmes should include behaviour change strategies to increase people's physical activity levels or decrease inactivity, improve eating behaviour and the quality of the person's diet and reduce energy intake.

Weight loss programmes are successful for people who stick with them but involve commitment and can be challenging. Obese people who completed a commercial weight loss programme over 12 months lost around 5-10% of their body weight. It is important to stress that even a modest reduction in weight brings important health benefits. Losing this amount of weight will significantly reduce your risk of developing conditions such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

There are four main goals in the treatment of obesity:

- Prevention of further weight gain
- Gradual weight loss by a combination of a calorie-controlled diet and regular exercise
- Avoiding regaining any lost weight
- Improvement of general health and reduction of risk of obesity-related complications

Some people prefer a one-to-one consultation with a trainer or dietitian, while others prefer being part of a weight loss group. Many people also need help to change unhealthy patterns of thinking and behavior.

Person-centered care²

Advice, treatment and care should take into account people's needs and preferences. People should have the opportunity to make informed decisions about their care and treatment, in partnership with their health professionals. Good communication between health professionals and patients is essential. It should be supported by evidence-based written information tailored to the patient's needs.

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The decision to start drug treatment, and the choice of drug, should be made after discussing with the patient the potential benefits and limitations, including the mode of action, adverse effects and monitoring requirements and their potential impact on the patient's motivation. Medications can aid weight loss, but these should be used in combination with the steps mentioned above, not as an alternative. Your doctor will be able to advise which is suitable for you.

Weight loss surgery is used as a last resort to treat people who are dangerously obese. A gastric band or gastric bypass operation is done to treat people with potentially life-threatening obesity that does not respond to non-surgical treatments, such as lifestyle changes.

References

- [1] NHS Obesity guidelines. <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Obesity/Pages/Introduction.aspx>
- [2] NICE guidelines (2006). CG43 Obesity: Obesity guidance on the prevention, identification, assessment and management of overweight and obesity in adults and children.