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Understanding Adult Obesity

More than 60 percent of Americans age 20 years or older are overweight. One-quarter of American adults are also obese, putting them at increased risk for chronic diseases such as heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke and some forms of cancer. If you suspect you have a weight problem, it is important to learn what obesity is, how it is measured, what causes it and what health risks are associated with it.

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What is obesity?

To most people, the term obesity means to be very overweight. Health professionals define overweight as an excess amount of body weight that includes muscle, bone, fat and water. Obesity specifically refers to an excess amount of body fat. Some people, such as bodybuilders or other athletes with a lot of muscle, can be overweight without being obese.

How is obesity measured?

Everyone needs a certain amount of body fat for stored energy, heat insulation, shock absorption and other functions. As a rule, women have more body fat than men. Most healthcare providers agree that men with more than 25 percent body fat and women with more than 30 percent body fat are obese.

In recent years, body mass index (BMI) has become the medical standard used to measure overweight people and obesity.

BMI uses a mathematical formula based on a person's height and weight. BMI equals weight in kilograms divided by height in meters squared ($BMI = \text{kg}/\text{m}^2$). Americans can follow this formula: $(\text{weight in pounds} \times 703) / (\text{height in inches} \times \text{height in inches})$. A BMI of 25 to 29.9 indicates a person is overweight. A person with a BMI of 30 or higher is considered obese.

BMI does not indicate the difference between excess fat and muscle. BMI, however, is closely associated with measures of body fat. It also predicts the development of health problems related to excess weight. For these reasons, healthcare providers widely use BMI.

Body-Fat Distribution

Healthcare providers are concerned not only with how much fat a person has, but also where the fat is located on the body. Women typically collect fat in their hips and buttocks, giving them a pear shape. Men usually build up fat around their bellies, giving them more of an apple shape. Of course, some men are pear-shaped and some women become apple-shaped, especially after menopause. If you carry fat mainly around your waist, you are more likely to develop obesity-related health problems. Women with a waist measurement of more than 35 inches or men with a waist measurement of more than 40 inches have a higher health risk because of their fat distribution.

Causes of Obesity

In scientific terms, obesity occurs when a person consumes more calories than he or she burns. What causes this imbalance between calories in and calories out may differ from one person to another. Genetic, environmental, psychological and other factors may all play a part:

- **Genetic factors:** Obesity tends to run in families, suggesting a genetic cause. However, families also share diet and lifestyle habits that may contribute to obesity. Separating these from genetic factors is often difficult. Even so science shows that heredity is linked to obesity. In one study adults who were adopted as children were found to have weights closer to their biological parents than to their adoptive parents. In this case, the person's genetic makeup

had more influence on the development of obesity than the environment in the adoptive family home.

- **Environmental factors:** These include lifestyle behaviors, such as what a person eats and his or her level of physical activity. Americans tend to eat high-fat foods and put taste and convenience ahead of nutrition. Also, most Americans do not get enough physical activity. Although you cannot change your genetic makeup, you can change your eating habits and levels of activity. Learn how to choose more nutritious meals that are lower in fat; learn to recognize and control environmental cues that make you want to eat when you're not hungry; become more physically active; and keep records of your food intake and physical activity.
- **Psychological factors:** Many people eat in response to negative emotions such as boredom, sadness or anger. Most overweight people have no more psychological problems than people of average weight. Still, up to 10 percent of people who are mildly obese and try to lose weight on their own or through commercial weight-loss programs have binge-eating disorder. This disorder is even more common in people who are severely obese. During a binge-eating episode, people eat large amounts of food and feel they cannot control how much they are eating. Those with the most severe binge-eating problems also are likely to have symptoms of depression and low self-esteem and may have more difficulty losing weight and keeping it off than people without binge-eating problems. If you think you might have binge-eating disorder, seek help from a health professional such as a psychiatrist, psychologist or clinical social worker.
- **Other causes of obesity:** Some illnesses can lead to obesity or a tendency to gain weight. These include hypothyroidism, Cushing's syndrome, depression and certain neurological problems that can lead to overeating. Also, drugs such as steroids and some antidepressants may cause weight gain. A doctor can tell whether underlying medical conditions are causing your weight gain or making your weight loss difficult.

Consequences of Obesity

Obesity is more than a cosmetic problem - it is a health hazard. Approximately 300,000 adult deaths in the United States each year are related to obesity. Several serious medical conditions have been linked to obesity, including Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and stroke. Obesity also is linked to higher rates of certain types of cancer. Obese men are more likely than non-obese men to die from cancer of the colon, rectum or prostate. Obese women are more likely than non-obese women to die from cancer of the gallbladder, breast, uterus, cervix or ovaries.

Other diseases and health problems linked to obesity include:

- Gallbladder disease and gallstones
- Liver disease
- Osteoarthritis, a disease in which the joints deteriorate (this is possibly the result of excess weight on the joints)
- Gout, another disease affecting the joints
- Pulmonary (breathing) problems, including sleep apnea, in which a person can stop breathing for a short time during sleep
- Reproductive problems in women, including menstrual irregularities and infertility.

Healthcare providers generally agree that the more obese a person is, the more likely he or she is to develop health problems.

Emotional suffering may be one of the most painful parts of obesity. American society emphasizes physical appearance and often equates attractiveness with slimness, especially for women. Such messages make overweight people feel unattractive. Many people think obese individuals are gluttonous, lazy or both, even though this is not true. As a result, obese people often face prejudice or discrimination in the job market, at school and in social situations. Feelings of rejection, shame or depression are common.

Who should lose weight?

Healthcare providers generally agree that people who have a BMI of 30 or more can improve their health through weight loss. This is especially true for people who are severely obese.

Preventing additional weight gain is recommended if you have a BMI between 25 and 29.9 unless you have other risk factors. Obesity experts recommend you try to lose weight if you have two or more of the following:

- **A family history of certain chronic diseases:** If you have close relatives who have had heart disease or diabetes, you are more likely to develop these problems if you are obese.
- **Pre-existing medical conditions:** High blood pressure, high cholesterol levels or high blood sugar levels are all warning signs of some obesity-associated diseases.
- **An apple-shaped body:** If your weight is concentrated around your waist, you may have a higher risk of heart disease, diabetes or cancer than people of the same weight who have a pear shape.

Fortunately, a weight loss of 5 to 10 percent can do much to improve health by lowering blood pressure and cholesterol levels. In addition, recent research has shown that a 5 to 7 percent weight loss can prevent Type 2 diabetes in people at high risk for the disease.

How is obesity treated?

The method of treatment depends on your level of obesity, overall health condition and motivation to lose weight. Treatment may include a combination of diet, exercise, behavior modification, and sometimes weight-loss drugs. In some cases of severe obesity, physicians may recommend gastrointestinal surgery. Remember, weight control is a lifelong effort.

Resources

- American Heart Association: www.heart.org (<http://www.heart.org>)
- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases: www.niddk.nih.gov (<http://www.niddk.nih.gov>)
- Nutrition.gov: www.nutrition.gov (<http://www.nutrition.gov>)
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration: www.fda.gov (<http://www.fda.gov>)
- U.S. National Library of Medicine: www.nlm.nih.gov (<http://www.nlm.nih.gov>)

Contributed by the Weight-Control Information Network, a service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases of the National Institutes of Health.

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