

Medical Care for Patients with Obesity

U.S. Department of Health
and Human Services



WIN *Weight-control Information Network*

More than one-third of adults in the United States are obese. The U.S. Government views obesity as one of the most severe health concerns facing the nation. With so many people struggling with obesity, almost all health care providers can expect to care for patients who are obese. This fact sheet offers helpful tips for health care providers to overcome the challenges unique to providing optimal care to these patients, no matter what weight-loss treatment is used.

What Is Obesity?

“Obesity” refers to an excess amount of body fat. It develops when the number of calories (energy) consumed in food and beverages exceeds the number of calories that the body burns to function. There are few studies in humans that link direct amounts of total body fat to sickness and death. There are also no formal standards issued by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) that define obesity based on the amount or percentage of a person’s total body fat. A common way to screen for obesity is the body mass index.

What Is the Body Mass Index?

The Body Mass Index (BMI) is a tool used to measure weight as it relates to height. BMI has its limits. It does not assess body fat or muscle directly. BMI is measured by dividing a person’s weight in pounds by height in inches squared and multiplying by 703.

Men and women can have the same BMI but different body fat percentages. As a rule, women usually have more body fat than men. A bodybuilder with large muscle mass and low body fat may have the same BMI as a person who has more body fat. However, a BMI of 30 or higher usually suggests excess body fat.

The NIH currently defines overweight as a BMI of 25 to 29.9 and obesity as a BMI greater than or equal to (\geq) 30. Obesity is further broken down into Class I (BMI of 30 to 34.9), Class II (BMI of 35 to 39.9), and Class III (BMI \geq 40) or “extreme obesity.” (See BMI table on page 7.) An online tool for measuring BMI is available at http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/educational/lose_wt/BMI/bmicalc.htm.

“Helping patients to overcome their sense of shame when it comes to discussing food and healthy eating may be hard—the most helpful action is to listen and establish a sense of trust.”

—A health care provider

Here are some issues that may prevent patients with obesity from seeking help:

- Being ashamed or embarrassed about their weight
- Hearing hurtful comments that the health care provider or staff may say about their weight
- Being disrespected by staff or health care providers in the past

What Are Some of the Challenges to Treating Patients with Obesity?

Patients with obesity may delay seeing a health care provider for routine medical care. They may also be less likely to receive certain health tests, such as Pap smears, breast exams, and pelvic exams. Lack of routine medical care is most likely the result of both patient and provider factors. Both the patient and the health care provider play a role in the health of the patient.

How Can Health Care Providers Offer Optimal Medical Care to Patients with Obesity?

Health care providers can take steps to make sure that their patients receive quality care. Health care providers should do the following:

- Treat patients with respect.
- Have suitable equipment and supplies on hand to improve patient access to care.
- Support healthy behaviors and self-acceptance even if the patient does not wish to lose weight or cannot successfully lose weight.

To create a positive office climate, medical and other staff should review this fact sheet.

Create a positive, open, and comfortable office space

- Provide sturdy, armless chairs and high, firm sofas in waiting rooms.
- Provide sturdy, wide exam tables bolted to the floor to prevent tipping.
- Provide a sturdy stool or step with handles to help patients climb onto the exam table.
- Provide extra-large patient gowns.
- Install a split toilet seat. Provide a specimen collector with a handle.
- Provide reading materials in the waiting room that focus on healthy habits, rather than physical looks or being “thin.”

Use medical devices that can correctly assess patients with obesity

- Use large adult blood pressure cuffs or thigh cuffs on patients with an upper-arm circumference greater than 34 cm.
- Use extra long needles to draw blood and have large vaginal specula on hand.
- Have a weight scale with the capacity to measure patients who weigh more than 400 pounds.

Be respectful when talking about the patient's weight

- Weigh patients in a private area and only when medically needed.
- Record weight without comments.
- Ask patients if they want to discuss their weight or health.
- Avoid using the term "obesity." Your patients may prefer such terms as "BMI" or "weight." Ask your patients what terms they would like you to use when discussing their weight.

Track and test for the following health problems linked to obesity:

- type 2 diabetes
- hypertension (high blood pressure)
- sleep apnea (when breathing pauses while sleeping)
- nonalcoholic steatohepatitis (fatty liver disease)
- lower extremity edema (swelling of the legs and feet)
- skin compression (ulcers)

Offer well-care services

- Allow enough time during office visits to provide well-care services.
- Suggest or provide such services as Pap smears, breast exams, mammography, prostate exams, and stool testing.

Here are some issues that may prevent a health care provider from providing the best care to patients who are obese:

- Lack of suitable medical tools to correctly assess and treat patients
- Lack of training in providing the physical and emotional support that patients may need
- Belief that a patient's weight is mainly due to lack of willpower
- Challenges performing exams, such as pelvic exams, due to a patient's size

“My doctor talks about nutrition and what to eat for my type, but not about dieting. She encourages exercise, but doesn’t push. I have been able to make beneficial changes in my diet under her nonjudgmental guidance. She is very respectful. . . . My comfort seems to be a goal for her.”

—A patient

Promote healthy behaviors

- Ask your patients if they would like to talk about weight loss. If they want to talk about losing weight, let them know that a weight loss of 5 to 7 percent of body weight may lower their chance of developing diabetes. Work with your patients to establish realistic goals.
- Start small. Encourage patients to start with simple goals such as walking for 10 minutes, three times a day. Once they achieve this goal, they can build on it.
- Offer patients information and referrals to registered dietitians, other health providers, and support groups, as needed.
- Promote self-acceptance and encourage patients to lead full and active lives.

Health care providers have the power to help improve the lives of patients with obesity. Changes that foster respect for the patient and a supportive and well-designed space for receiving services are within reach of most health care providers. The suggestions outlined in this fact sheet offer a solid starting place. Additional resources to help achieve these changes are listed at the end of this fact sheet.

Research

The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) conducts and supports a broad range of basic and clinical obesity research. More information about obesity research is available at <http://www.obesityresearch.nih.gov>.

Clinical trials are research studies involving people. Clinical trials look at safe and effective new ways to prevent, detect, or treat disease. Researchers also use clinical trials to look at other aspects of care, such as improving the quality of life for people with chronic illnesses. To learn more about clinical trials, why they matter, and how to participate, visit the NIH Clinical Research Trials and You website at <http://www.nih.gov/health/clinicaltrials>. For information about current studies, visit <http://www.ClinicalTrials.gov>.

Additional Information for Health Care Providers

Davis NJ, Shishodia H, Taqui B, Dumfeh C, Wylie-Rosett J. Resident physician attitudes and competence about obesity treatment: need for improved education. *Medical Education Online*. 2008;13:5. Available at <http://www.med-ed-online.net/index.php/meol/article/download/4475/4655>. Accessed March 2011.

Huizinga MM, Cooper LA, Bleich SN, Clark JM, Beach MC. Physician respect for patients with obesity. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*. Nov 2009;24(11):1236–1239. Available at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2771236/?tool=pubme>. Accessed March 2011.

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, NIH. Body Mass Index Tables. http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/guidelines/obesity/bmi_tbl.htm. Accessed June 2011.

National Task Force on the Prevention and Treatment of Obesity. Medical care for obese patients: advice for health care professionals. *American Family Physician*. 2002;65(1):81–88. Available at <http://www.aafp.org/afp/2002/0101/p81.html>. Accessed March 2011.

Shay LE, Shobert JL, Seibert D, Thomas LE. Adult weight management: translating research and guidelines into practice. *Journal of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners*. Apr 2009;21(4):197–206. Available at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1745-7599.2008.00383.x/full>. Accessed March 2011.

Medical Supplies and Equipment

Amplestuff: Make Your World Fit You (Catalog)

Department WS

P.O. Box 116

Bearsville, NY 12409

Phone: 845–679–3316

Toll-free number: 1–866–486–1655

Email: amplestuff2@aol.com

Internet: <http://www.amplestuff.com>

Additional Reading from the Weight-control Information Network

The following publications are available online at the addresses listed in each description and also by calling WIN toll-free at 1–877–946–4627.

Active at Any Size explains the benefits of regular physical activity and describes activities that people who are overweight or obese can enjoy safely (available online at <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/active.htm>).

Changes that foster respect for the patient and a supportive and well-designed space for receiving services are within reach of most health care providers.

“My doctor never judges me on my weight and never talks down to me about it.”

—A patient

Bariatric Surgery for Severe Obesity explains how this operation on the stomach and/or intestines helps patients with extreme obesity to lose weight. Patients may use this fact sheet to talk about this option with their health care providers. This fact sheet explains which patients might choose this option and describes the different types of bariatric surgery (available online at <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/gastric.htm>).

Just Enough for You: About Food Portions explains the difference between a portion and a serving, and offers tips to help readers choose healthy portions (available online at http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/just_enough.htm).

Talking With Patients About Weight Loss: Tips for Primary Care Professionals offers ideas for speaking respectfully with patients about overweight and obesity and helping them set and maintain goals. It includes a tear-off sheet with tips and resources (available online at <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/talking.htm>).

Walking... A Step in the Right Direction explains how to start a walking program, presents a sample program, and shows stretches for warming up and cooling down (available online at <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/walking.htm>).

Additional Information for Patients

American Association of Diabetes Educators

100 West Monroe Street, Suite 400

Chicago, IL 60603

Phone: 1-800-338-3633

Email: aade@aadenet.org

Internet: <http://www.diabeteseducator.org>

Locate a certified diabetes educator (C.D.E.).

American Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics

120 South Riverside Plaza, Suite 2000

Chicago, IL 60606-6995

Phone: 1-800-877-1600

Email: findnrd@eatright.org

Internet: <http://www.eatright.org>

Locate a registered dietitian (R.D.).

National Diabetes Information Clearinghouse

1 Information Way

Bethesda, MD 20892-3560

Phone: 1-800-860-8747

Email: ndic@info.niddk.nih.gov

Internet: <http://www.diabetes.niddk.nih.gov>

Find health information and publications on diabetes.

Body Mass Index Table

To use the table, find the appropriate height in the left-hand column labeled Height. Move across to a given weight (in pounds). The number at the top of the column is the BMI at that height and weight. Pounds have been rounded off.

		Normal										Overweight										Obese										Extreme Obesity																			
Height (inches)	BMI	Body Mass Index Table																																																	
		19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54														
58	91	96	100	105	110	115	119	124	129	134	138	143	148	153	158	162	167	172	177	181	186	191	196	201	205	210	215	220	224	229	234	239	244	248	253	258															
59	94	99	104	109	114	119	124	128	133	138	143	148	153	158	163	168	173	178	183	188	193	198	203	208	212	217	222	227	232	237	242	247	252	257	262																
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61	100	106	111	116	122	127	132	137	143	148	153	158	164	169	174	180	185	190	195	201	206	211	217	222	227	232	238	243	248	254	259	264	269	275	280																
62	104	109	115	120	126	131	136	142	147	153	158	164	169	175	180	186	191	196	202	207	213	218	224	229	235	240	246	251	256	262	267	273	278	284																	
63	107	113	118	124	130	135	141	146	152	158	163	169	175	180	186	191	197	203	208	214	220	225	231	237	242	248	254	259	265	270	278	282	287	293																	
64	110	116	122	128	134	140	145	151	157	163	169	174	180	186	192	197	204	209	215	221	227	232	238	244	250	256	262	267	273	279	285	291	296	302																	
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74	148	155	163	171	179	186	194	202	210	218	225	233	241	249	256	264	272	280	287	295	303	311	319	326	334	342	350	358	365	373	381	389	396	404																	
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76	156	164	172	180	189	197	205	213	221	230	238	246	254	263	271	279	287	295	304	312	320	328	336	344	353	361	369	377	385	394	402	410	418	426																	

Source: Adapted from *Clinical Guidelines on the Identification, Evaluation, and Treatment of Overweight and Obesity in Adults*.
The Evidence Report. NIH Publication No. 98-4083: National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 1998.

Advocacy and Policy Organizations

Council on Size and Weight Discrimination

P.O. Box 305
Mount Marion, NY 12456
Phone: 845-679-1209
Email: info@cswd.org
Internet: <http://www.cswd.org>

National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance

P.O. Box 4662
Foster City, CA 94404-0662
Phone: 916-558-6880
Internet: <http://www.naafa.org>

Obesity Action Coalition

4511 North Himes Avenue, Suite 250
Tampa, FL 33614
Phone: 800-717-3117
Internet: <http://www.obesityaction.org>

Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity

Yale University
309 Edwards Street
New Haven, CT 06520-8369
Phone: 203-432-6700
Internet: <http://www.yaleruddcenter.org>

The Obesity Society

8630 Fenton Street, Suite 918
Silver Spring, MD 20910
Phone: 301-563-6526
Internet: <http://www.obesity.org>

Weight-control Information Network

1 WIN Way
Bethesda, MD 20892-3665
Phone: 202-828-1025
Toll-free number: 1-877-946-4627
Fax: 202-828-1028
Email: WIN@info.niddk.nih.gov
Internet: <http://www.win.niddk.nih.gov>



<http://www.facebook.com/win.niddk.nih.gov>

The Weight-control Information Network (WIN) is a national information service of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). WIN provides the general public, health professionals, and the media with science-based, up-to-date, culturally relevant materials and tips. Topics include how to consume healthy foods and beverages, barriers to physical activity, portion control, and eating and physical activity myths.

Publications produced by WIN are reviewed by both NIDDK scientists and outside experts. This fact sheet was also reviewed by Rebecca Puhl, Ph.D., Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, Yale University.

Special thanks to Lynn McAfee of the Council on Size and Weight Discrimination for providing the patient quotes for this fact sheet.

You may also find additional information about this topic by visiting MedlinePlus at <http://www.medlineplus.gov>.

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