

Obesity: causes and prevention

Obesity is a complex disease involving an excessive amount of body fat. Obesity isn't just a cosmetic concern. It is a medical problem that increases your risk of other diseases and health problems, such as heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and certain cancers.

There are many reasons why some people have difficulty avoiding obesity. Usually, obesity results from a combination of inherited factors, combined with the environment and personal diet and exercise choices.

The good news is that even modest weight loss can improve or prevent the health problems associated with obesity. Dietary changes, increased physical activity and behavior changes can help you lose weight. Prescription medications and weight-loss procedures are additional options for treating obesity.

Symptoms

Obesity is diagnosed when your body mass index (BMI) is 30 or higher. To determine your body mass index, divide your weight in pounds by your height in inches squared and multiply by 703. Or divide your weight in kilograms by your height in meters squared.

BMI Weight status

Below 18.5 Underweight

18.5–24.9 Normal

25.0–29.9 Overweight

30.0 and higher Obesity

For most people, BMI provides a reasonable estimate of body fat. However, BMI doesn't directly measure body fat, so some people, such as muscular athletes, may have a BMI in the obesity category even though they don't have excess body fat.

When to see a doctor

If you're concerned about weight-related health problems, ask your doctor about obesity management. You and your doctor can evaluate your health risks and discuss your weight-loss options.

Causes

Although there are genetic, behavioral, metabolic and hormonal influences on body weight, obesity occurs when you take in more calories than you burn through exercise and normal daily activities. Your body stores these excess calories as fat.

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Most Americans' diets are too high in calories —often from fast food and high-calorie beverages. People with obesity might eat more calories before feeling full, feel hungry sooner, or eat more due to stress or anxiety.

Risk factors

Obesity usually results from a combination of causes and contributing factors:

Family inheritance and influences

The genes you inherit from your parents may affect the amount of body fat you store, and where that fat is distributed. Genetics may also play a role in how efficiently your body converts food into energy, how your body regulates your appetite and how your body burns calories during exercise.

Obesity tends to run in families. That's not just because of the genes they share. Family members also tend to share similar eating and activity habits.

Lifestyle choices

Unhealthy diet. A diet that's high in calories, lacking in fruits and vegetables, full of fast food, and laden with high-calorie beverages and oversized portions contributes to weight gain.

Liquid calories. People can drink many calories without feeling full, especially calories from alcohol. Other high-calorie beverages, such as sugared soft drinks, can contribute to significant weight gain.

Inactivity. If you have a sedentary lifestyle, you can easily take in more calories every day than you burn through exercise and routine daily activities. Looking at computer, tablet and phone screens is a sedentary activity. The number of hours you spend in front of a screen is highly associated with weight gain.

Certain diseases and medications

In some people, obesity can be traced to a medical cause, such as Prader-Willi syndrome, Cushing syndrome and other conditions. Medical problems, such as arthritis, also can lead to decreased activity, which may result in weight gain.

Some medications can lead to weight gain if you don't compensate through diet or activity. These medications include some antidepressants, anti-seizure medications, diabetes medications, antipsychotic medications, steroids and beta blockers.

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Social and economic issues

Social and economic factors are linked to obesity. Avoiding obesity is difficult if you don't have safe areas to walk or exercise. Similarly, you may not have been taught healthy ways of cooking, or you may not have access to healthier foods. In addition, the people you spend time with may influence your weight—you're more likely to develop obesity if you have friends or relatives with obesity.

Age

Obesity can occur at any age, even in young children. But as you age, hormonal changes and a less active lifestyle increase your risk of obesity. In addition, the amount of muscle in your body tends to decrease with age. Generally, lower muscle mass leads to a decrease in metabolism. These changes also reduce calorie needs, and can make it harder to keep off excess weight. If you don't consciously control what you eat and become more physically active as you age, you'll likely gain weight.

Other factors

Pregnancy. Weight gain is common during pregnancy. Some women find this weight difficult to lose after the baby is born. This weight gain may contribute to the development of obesity in women. Breast-feeding may be the best option to lose the weight gained during pregnancy.

Quitting smoking. Quitting smoking is often associated with weight gain. And for some, it can lead to enough weight gain to qualify as obesity. Often, this happens as people use food to cope with smoking withdrawal. In the long run, however, quitting smoking is still a greater benefit to your health than is continuing to smoke. Your doctor can help you prevent weight gain after quitting smoking.

Lack of sleep. Not getting enough sleep or getting too much sleep can cause changes in hormones that increase your appetite. You may also crave foods high in calories and carbohydrates, which can contribute to weight gain.

Stress. Many external factors that affect your mood and well-being may contribute to obesity. People often seek more high-calorie food when experiencing stressful situations.

Microbiome. Your gut bacteria are affected by what you eat and may contribute to weight gain or difficulty losing weight.

Previous attempts to lose weight. Previous attempts of weight loss followed by rapid weight regain may contribute to further weight gain. This phenomenon, sometimes called yo-yo dieting, can slow your metabolism.

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Even if you have one or more of these risk factors, it doesn't mean that you're destined to develop obesity. You can counteract most risk factors through diet, physical activity and exercise, and behavior changes.

Complications

People with obesity are more likely to develop a number of potentially serious health problems, including:

Heart disease and strokes. Obesity makes you more likely to have high blood pressure and abnormal cholesterol levels, which are risk factors for heart disease and strokes.

Type 2 diabetes. Obesity can affect the way your body uses insulin to control blood sugar levels. This raises your risk of insulin resistance and diabetes.

Certain cancers. Obesity may increase your risk of cancer of the uterus, cervix, endometrium, ovary, breast, colon, rectum, esophagus, liver, gallbladder, pancreas, kidney and prostate.

Digestive problems. Obesity increases the likelihood that you'll develop heartburn, gallbladder disease and liver problems.

Gynecological and sexual problems. Obesity may cause infertility and irregular periods in women. Obesity also can cause erectile dysfunction in men.

Sleep apnea. People with obesity are more likely to have sleep apnea, a potentially serious disorder in which breathing repeatedly stops and starts during sleep.

Osteoarthritis. Obesity increases the stress placed on weight-bearing joints, in addition to promoting inflammation within the body. These factors may lead to complications such as osteoarthritis

Prevention

Whether you're at risk of obesity, currently overweight or at a healthy weight, you can take steps to prevent unhealthy weight gain and related health problems. Not surprisingly, the steps to prevent weight gain are the same as the steps to lose weight: daily exercise, a healthy diet, and a long-term commitment to watch what you eat and drink.

Exercise regularly. You need to get 150 to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity activity a week to prevent weight gain. Moderately intense physical activities include fast walking and swimming.

Follow a healthy-eating plan. Focus on low-calorie, nutrient-dense foods, such as fruits,

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vegetables and whole grains. Avoid saturated fat and limit sweets and alcohol. Eat three regular meals a day with limited snacking. You can still enjoy small amounts of high-fat, high-calorie foods as an infrequent treat. Just be sure to choose foods that promote a healthy weight and good health most of the time.

Know and avoid the food traps that cause you to eat. Identify situations that trigger out-of-control eating. Try keeping a journal and write down what you eat, how much you eat, when you eat, how you're feeling and how hungry you are. After a while, you should see patterns emerge. You can plan ahead and develop strategies for handling these types of situations and stay in control of your eating behaviors.

Monitor your weight regularly. People who weigh themselves at least once a week are more successful in keeping off excess pounds. Monitoring your weight can tell you whether your efforts are working and can help you detect small weight gains before they become big problems.

Be consistent. Sticking to your healthy-weight plan during the week, on the weekends, and amidst vacation and holidays as much as possible increases your chances of long-term success