
Diseases & Conditions

Obesity

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Overview

Obesity is a complex disease involving having too much body fat. You might think of obesity as a cosmetic concern. But it's a medical condition that increases the risk of many other diseases and health conditions. These can include heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, liver disease, sleep apnea and certain cancers.

There are many reasons why some people have trouble losing weight. Often, obesity results from inherited, physiological and environmental factors, combined with diet, physical activity and exercise choices.

The good news is that even modest weight loss can improve or prevent the health conditions associated with obesity. A healthier diet, increased physical activity and behavior changes can help you lose weight. Prescription medicines and weight-loss procedures are other options for treating obesity.

Products & Services

[A Book: The Mayo Clinic Diet Bundle](#)

Symptoms

Body mass index, also known as BMI, is often used to diagnose obesity. To calculate BMI, multiply weight in pounds by 703, divide by height in inches and then divide again by height in inches. Or divide weight in kilograms by height in meters squared. There are several online calculators available that help calculate BMI.

[See BMI calculator.](#)

BMI	Weight status
Below 18.5	Underweight
18.5-24.9	Healthy
25.0-29.9	Overweight
30.0 and higher	Obesity

Asians with a BMI of 23 or higher may have an increased risk of health problems.

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

Many healthcare professionals also measure around a person's waist to help guide treatment decisions. This measurement is called a waist circumference. Weight-related health conditions are more common in men with a waist circumference over 40 inches (102 centimeters). They're more common in women with a waist circumference over 35 inches (89 centimeters). Body fat percentage is another measurement that may be used during a weight-loss program to track progress.

When to see a doctor

If you're concerned about your weight or weight-related health conditions, ask your healthcare professional about obesity management. You and your healthcare team can evaluate your health risks and discuss your weight-loss options.

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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 typical daily activities and exercise. Your body stores these excess calories as fat.

In the United States, most people's 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 more often, or eat more due to stress or anxiety.

Many people who live in Western countries now have jobs that are much less physically demanding, so they don't tend to burn as many calories at work. Even daily activities use fewer calories courtesy of conveniences such as remote controls, escalators, online shopping, and drive-thru restaurants and banks.

Risk factors

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

Family inheritance and influences

The genes passed down to you from your parents may affect the amount of body fat you store and where that fat is distributed. Genetics also may 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 weight gain.
- **Inactivity.** If you have an inactive 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 inactivity. The number of hours spent in front of a screen is highly associated with weight gain.

Certain diseases and medicines

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

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

Social and economic issues

Social and economic factors are linked to obesity. It's hard to avoid obesity if you don't have safe areas to walk or exercise. You may not have learned healthy ways of cooking. Or you may not have access to healthier foods. Also, 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. The amount of muscle in your body also tends to decrease with age. Lower muscle mass often 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