

A New Look at Obesity

Obesity has long been known to increase the risk of poor health, but until very recently it was considered to be a simple problem of excess calories. For the millions of Canadians who struggle with being heavy and who suffer from the associated metabolic diseases, this approach has not been working. Furthermore, the social stigma against being overweight has contributed to poor health outcomes, including bias in the healthcare system that can lower the quality of care. It's clear that current treatments are not effective in managing long-term weight loss, but we now understand that obesity is not a simple disease. There are underlying genetic factors, social influences, and alterations in the way the brain perceives hunger, food intake and emotion. Our bodies are programmed to survive starvation through evolution, and in some people this can prevent weight loss in spite of calorie deficit. When all these factors are addressed, there is hope for achieving a weight that is best for the individual, and which allows them to live a full life and enjoy good health.

It's very important that we do address obesity. Based on a 2018 census, 63% of Canadians are either overweight or obese, and the number is still rising. Obesity is a progressive disease, it will get worse if left untreated, and obese people suffer from reduced quality of life and poor health. Diseases that are related to metabolism like diabetes and high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease and fatty liver disease are much more frequent and severe in obese people. But obesity also increases the risk and severity of many other diseases including arthritis and cancer. Outcomes following any surgery and illness are worse in obese people and overall mortality rates are higher.

In order to find a better solution, the Canadian Medical Association published a new set of guidelines in August 2020. These recommendations for clinicians and patients are based on a full review of the scientific evidence for the causes, outcomes and effective treatments of obesity. Here is what they say:

Facts:

- Obesity is a serious and complex chronic disease where excessive body fat impairs health.
- Excess body fat is associated with an increased risk of metabolic diseases like diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease. Obese people have higher rates of other diseases like liver and digestive problems, cancer, osteoarthritis and depression. If they undergo a surgery, obese people are more likely to have complications and they experience poor outcomes with all illnesses. They are more likely to die when they get sick or suffer a trauma.
- BMI (Body Mass Index) and waist circumference are not good tools for predicting individual health complications of obesity.



- To effectively treat obesity, the underlying causes must be determined and addressed. There is no one-size fits all solution.
- Programs that focus on only weight loss are often not sustainable and almost always lead to regain of weight.
- Behavior is only one component of what causes obesity; genetics, the brain and hormones also contribute.
- The stigma against obesity contributes to the poor health outcomes independently of the physical effects.

What To Expect:

- It's necessary for your health care provider to identify and understand the underlying causes of your obesity before they can design an effective treatment program. This process should include a comprehensive medical history, an appropriate physical examination including laboratory testing, and social and psychological evaluations.
- Understanding and addressing both social and physical barriers to weight loss is an important part of successful weight management. Strong and appropriate support is critical for long-term change to take place.
- The goal of obesity treatment should be improved health, not just weight loss. Even small reductions in body fat can lead to substantial improvements in health.
- Increasing physical activity to 30-60 minutes of moderately intense activity most days of the week will improve health even if weight loss is not achieved.

What You Can Do:

- Seek help from a health professional who respects your condition and is willing to work with you in a positive manner to find sustainable solutions to improve your health.
- Discuss the treatment options with your health care provider, including physical activity, nutritional strategies, behavioral change, and social and psychological support, as well as medications and even surgery.
- Don't wait to ask for help. Early intervention is important for managing health implications. Obesity is a progressive disease that generally gets worse without effective treatment.
- Set realistic goals that focus on improved overall health and maintenance of your 'best' weight – one where you can both enjoy your life and decrease the health and social problems experienced due to your disease.
- Managing weight loss is very challenging and is a lifelong commitment. Establishing healthy nutritional and physical habits will be good for you, your family and your community.
- Since obesity has a large genetic component, helping yourself will also help your children.



What Employers And Supervisors Can Do:

- Include obesity bias in your diversity training. The stigma against obese and overweight people is real and has negative impacts on the physical and mental health of those who suffer from the disease.
- Evaluate your organizational practices for food availability. If on-site food is provided, ensure that there are nutritious and attractive options for those who need to manage their calorie intake.
- Review your worksite for access to safe environments for physical activity. Use team building, social and community events to promote physical activity.
- When individuals engage in behavioral change, supervisors can act to encourage social support from co-workers as needed. Some workers may want to keep their treatment program private while others will benefit from recognition and more obvious support by their peers.

More Information

Videos and Infographic:

obesitycanada.ca/understanding-obesity/

Health Impacts of Obesity:

obesitycanada.ca/understanding-obesity/health-impacts-obesity/

Adult Obesity Causes & Consequences:

www.cdc.gov/obesity/adult/causes.html

Fit to Work Programs:

www.bcforestsafesafe.org/node/3013

Exercise is Medicine:

www.exerciseismedicine.org/support_page.php/rx-for-health-series/