Health Basics

Obesity

What is obesity?
Closely related to being overweight, obesity is a range of weight that categorizes a person as being unhealthy. This is based on body mass index (BMI), a number calculated from someone's weight and height that is linked to the amount of body fat he or she carries.

As defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an overweight adult is one who has a BMI between 25 and 29.9. An obese adult is one who has a BMI of 30 or higher.

Overweight and obesity are both labels for ranges of weight that are greater than what is generally considered healthy for a given height. The terms also identify ranges of weight that have been shown to increase the likelihood of certain diseases and other health problems.

For children and teens, the CDC uses BMI-for-age measurements that account for normal differences in body fat between boys and girls and differences in body fat for the sexes at various ages.

What causes obesity?
Obesity is caused by a variety of factors, both simple and complex. At the simple end of the spectrum, weight gain and obesity can result when people consume more calories than they burn. But complex issues such as genetics, metabolism, behavior, the environment, culture and socioeconomic status also come into play.

Statistics show that obesity disproportionately affects African Americans. The illness puts them at risk for a number of obesity-related diseases, such as diabetes, hypertension, cancer and heart disease.

The following statistics are from various studies focusing on African Americans:

- African-American women have the highest rates of being overweight or obese compared with other groups in the United States. About four out of five African-American women are overweight or obese. (Source: The Office of Minority Health)
- 46.8 percent of Black adults are obese compared to 37.9 white adults. (Source: National Health

and Nutrition Examination Survey)

- 22 percent of African-American youth ages 2 to 19 are obese, compared with 14 percent of non-Hispanic white children. (Source: National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey)

What's the difference between obesity and morbid obesity?
Simply stated, the difference between obesity and morbid obesity is that obesity is a common medical condition while morbid obesity is considered a disease.

Morbid obesity is a much more severe form of obesity. People who are 100 or more pounds over his/her ideal body weight, have a BMI of 35 or more and experience obesity-related health conditions are considered morbidly obese.

Doctors recognize morbid obesity as a serious health condition that can interfere with basic physical functions such as breathing or walking.

As previously stated, obesity puts people at risk for a number of diseases. Those who are morbidly obese are at even greater risk for certain illnesses, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, sleep apnea, gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), gallstones, osteoarthritis, heart disease and cancer.

How can obesity be prevented?
Government health care organizations and other disease control and prevention entities recognize that obesity is a preventable condition.

To combat the problem, they have implemented many policy and environmental initiatives that support affordable and easy lifestyle changes in the areas of nutrition and fitness.

Many state-based programs work in conjunction with multiple partners. Their goal is to help eliminate obesity by educating people and empowering them to make specific lifestyle changes to decrease the condition. These include:

- Increasing physical activity
- Consuming more fruits and vegetables
- Drinking fewer sugar-sweetened beverages
- Encouraging mothers to breast-feed their babies
- Consuming less high-calorie food
- Cutting back on television viewing

How is obesity treated?
To treat obesity, doctors recommend patients lose weight and maintain weight loss over the long

term through diet and regular physical activity.

For additional treatment, doctors may prescribe medications people with BMI of 30 or greater or those who have a BMI greater than 27 as well as medical complications of obesity, such as diabetes, hypertension and sleep apnea.

Doctors caution, however, that prescription weight-loss medications are appropriate for patients at increased medical risk because of their weight, not for people seeking “cosmetic” weight loss. In addition, they stress that patients should try to lose weight through diet and exercise before resorting to medications.

It is recommended that medicine also be used in conjunction with diet, exercise and lifestyle changes, not instead of them.

How is morbid obesity treated?
For very overweight patients who can’t lose weight via healthy diet and exercise, doctors recommend bariatric surgery as an option.

In particular, doctors recommend this option for people who have a BMI between 35 and 39.9 and at least one or more obesity-related comorbidities, such as diabetes, sleep apnea and heart disease.

Common bariatric surgery procedures are gastric bypass, gastric banding, sleeve gastrectomy and biliopancreatic diversion with duodenal switch.

Where can I get help?
The first resource for information and recommendations for treatment options is always a family doctor or other health care provider.

In addition, it’s always recommended you educate yourself about any illness or condition you experience. Some authoritative online resources are below. Visit them for fact sheets, videos and other materials about obesity.

- The Food and Drug Administration
- The National Institutes of Health
- The Obesity Society
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- The Obesity Medicine Association

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