Understanding Obesity

Obesity is a chronic medical condition that affects how the body stores and uses energy. It is influenced by many factors, including biology, environment, medications, sleep, stress, and daily habits.

Many people living with obesity have tried multiple approaches to manage their weight. Understanding how obesity works can help patients and healthcare teams choose treatments that are safer, more effective, and more sustainable.

What this brochure covers:

- **What is Obesity?**
- **Why does it happen?**
- **How is it treated?**
- **How can your health-care team help?**

This brochure uses the term obesity to describe a chronic health condition. Some people may be described as having overweight or obesity based on body measurements used in healthcare.

Scan the QR code to visit these websites.

Scan QR Code to visit Obesity Patient Summary

2025 Obesity Patient Guideline Summary:

OBE-CPG_2025-Patient-Summary_final_20251105.pdf

Scan QR Code to visit VA Move!

VA MOVE! Weight Management Program for Veterans:

https://www.move.va.gov

Scan QR Code to visit Veterans Health Library

Veterans Health Library:

https://www.veteranshealthlibrary.va.gov/HealthyLiving/

Scan QR Code to visit CDC

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

https://www.cdc.gov/obesity

Scan QR Code to visit NHLBI

National Health, Lung, and Blood Institute:

https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/overweight-and-obesity

For more information on the VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Management of Adult Overweight & Obesity visit:
https://www.health.mil/About-MHS/MHS-Elements/DVPO/VADOD-CPGs

Scan QR Code to visit OBE CPG

Understanding Obesity

What you need to know.

How healthcare defines overweight and obesity

Overweight and obesity are medical categories used to describe patterns of body fat linked to health risk and to guide healthcare decisions.

Overweight

A medical term used when body fat is above ranges associated with lower health risk and may be an early point for support and care.

Obesity

A chronic medical condition involving excess body fat and changes in how the body regulates weight, energy use, and fat storage.

Healthcare providers use specific body measurements to identify overweight and obesity. These measures help estimate health risk and guide decisions about evaluation and treatment.

Body Mass Index (BMI) Category	BMI Range (kg/m^2)	BMI Range for Asian Populations (kg/m^2)
Normal Weight	18.5 - 24.9	18.5 - 22.9
Overweight	25.0 - 29.9	23.0 - 24.9
Obesity Class 1	30.0 - 34.9	25.0 - 29.9

BMI does not measure body fat directly, but it is widely used in healthcare to assess risk.

Measurement	Standard Cutoff for Obesity	Asian Population Cutoff
Body Mass Index (weight (kg)/height (m^2))	≥ 30 kg/m^2	≥ 27.5 kg/m^2
Waist Circumference	≥ 102 cm (40 in) for men ≥ 88 cm (35 in) for women	≥ 90 cm (35.4 in) for men ≥ 80 cm (31.5 in) for women
Waist-to-Height Ratio	≥ 0.5	≥ 0.5

These measures do not tell the whole story. People with the same measurements can have very different health profiles. Providers consider these numbers alongside family (blood relatives) medical history when known, lab results, and overall health.

Why obesity happens

Obesity develops when the body's hunger and energy systems become disrupted over time. These systems involve hormones, the brain, muscles, and fat tissue, and are shaped by biology and environment.

Many factors can contribute, including:

- Genetics and family history
- Changes in metabolism and hormones
- Certain medications and medical conditions
- Sleep problems and chronic stress
- Food environment and daily routines
- Past weight loss attempts and weight cycling

Because the body works to defend its energy stores, it may resist weight loss by increasing hunger, lowering metabolism, and making weight regain more likely. This is why obesity is considered a chronic medical condition and not a personal failure.

Why it matters

Obesity can affect much more than body weight. Over time, it can increase the risk of other health conditions, including:

- Heart disease and high blood pressure
- Type 2 diabetes and pre-diabetes
- Joint and back problems
- Sleep apnea and breathing problems
- Liver disease
- Certain cancers
- Reduced energy, mobility, and quality of life

Addressing obesity can improve health, daily function, and long-term well-being. Even modest, sustained changes in weight and health behaviors can lead to meaningful improvements.

Obesity develops through complex interactions between the body and its environment. Understanding these factors helps patients and healthcare teams choose treatments that work with the body and not against it.

How obesity is treated

Obesity care is individualized and ongoing

Obesity is treated as a chronic medical condition. Care is often provided by a multidisciplinary team that may include a health care provider, dietitian, behavioral health specialist, pharmacist, and physical activity specialists.

Most care plans are built on Comprehensive Lifestyle Intervention (CLI), with other therapies added when appropriate.

Individualized lifestyle-based care

CLI combines behavior-change strategies, nutrition support, physical activity, sleep and stress care. These supports are adapted to the individual and adjusted over time to help build sustainable routines and long-term health.

Medications

Some patients benefit from prescription medications that help regulate hunger, fullness, and energy balance. Medications may be used alongside lifestyle-based care, based on medical needs, not as a last resort.

Procedures and metabolic surgery

For some patients, procedures or surgery may be part of treatment. These therapies work by changing how the body regulates hormones, hunger, and energy use and are combined with long-term follow-up and lifestyle support.

Ongoing support and follow-up

Care often includes regular check-ins, monitoring, and adjustment of the treatment plan. Healthcare teams address both physical and emotional health and support related conditions.

Obesity treatment is personalized and ongoing.