

Patient education: Health risks of obesity (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What does it mean to be obese? — Doctors use a special measure called "body mass index," or BMI, to decide who is underweight, at a healthy weight, overweight, or obese. A person who is obese weighs way too much for his or her height.

Your BMI will tell you whether your weight is appropriate for your height.

- If your BMI is between 25 and 29.9, you are overweight.
- If your BMI is 30 or greater, you are obese.

Being obese is a problem, because it increases the risks of many different health problems. It can also make it hard for you to move, breathe, and do other things that people who are at a healthy weight can do easily. Plus, being obese can be hard emotionally, because it can make you feel ashamed or like you don't fit in.

What are the health risks of being obese? — Being obese increases a person's risk of developing many health problems. Here are just a few examples:

- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- Heart disease (including heart attacks)
- Stroke
- Sleep apnea (a disorder in which you stop breathing for short periods while asleep)
- Asthma
- Cancer

Does being obese shorten a person's life? — Yes. Studies show that people who are obese die younger than people who are a healthy weight. They also show that the risk of death goes up the heavier a person is. The degree of increased risk depends on how long the person has been obese, and on what other medical problems he or she has.

People with "central obesity" might also be at risk of dying younger. Central obesity means carrying extra weight in the belly area, even if the BMI is normal.

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — Yes. If you are overweight or obese, see your doctor or nurse. He or she might have suggestions on ways to lose weight.

Are there medical treatments that can help me lose weight? — Yes. There are medicines and surgery to help with weight loss. But those treatments are only for people with severe obesity who have not been able to lose weight through diet and exercise. Also, weight loss treatments do not take the place of diet and exercise. People who have those treatments must also change how they eat and how active they are.

What can I do to prevent the problems caused by being obese? — The obvious answer is that you can lose weight. But even if weight loss is not possible, you can improve your health and reduce your risk if you:

- **Become more active** – Many types of physical activity can help, including walking. You can start with a few minutes a day and add more as you get stronger.
- **Improve your diet** – No single diet turns out to be better than any other. It is healthy to have regular meal times and smaller portions, and not to skip meals. Avoid sweets and processed snack foods, and instead eat more vegetables and fruits.
- **Quit smoking** (if you smoke) – Some people start eating more after they stop smoking, so try to make healthy food choices. Even if it increases your appetite, quitting smoking is still one of the best things you can do to improve your health.
- **Limit alcohol** – Drink no more than 1 drink a day if you are woman, and no more than 2 drinks a day if you are a man.

What causes obesity? — The thing that increases a person's risk the most is having an unhealthy lifestyle. Most people become obese because they simply eat too much, make unhealthy food choices, and move too little. That's especially true of people who watch too much TV. But there are also other things that seem to increase the risk of obesity that many people do not know about. Here are some things that might affect a person's chance of becoming obese:

- **Mom's habits during and after pregnancy** – Women who eat a lot of calories, have diabetes, or smoke during pregnancy have a higher chance of having babies who grow up to be obese. Also, babies who drink formula might be more likely than breastfed babies to be obese later in life.
- **Habits and weight gain during childhood** – People who are overweight or obese as children or as teens are more likely to be obese as adults.
- **Sleeping too little** – People who do not get enough sleep are more likely to become obese than people who sleep enough.
- **Taking certain medicines** – Long-term use of certain medicines, such as some medicines to treat depression, can cause a lot of weight gain.

- Certain hormonal conditions – Some hormonal problems can increase the risk of becoming obese. For example, women with a condition called "polycystic ovary syndrome" often gain weight, along with having other symptoms like irregular periods. But hormonal conditions are to blame for only a tiny fraction of cases of obesity.

What if I want to have children? — If you want to have children, you should know that being obese can make it hard for a woman to get pregnant. It can also impair a man's ability to have sex, especially if the obese man has high blood pressure or diabetes. What's more, children born to obese parents have a high risk of being obese themselves.

What if my child is obese? — In children, obesity has many of the same risks as it does in adults. For example, it can increase the risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma, and sleep apnea. It can also cause added problems related to childhood. For example, obesity can make children grow faster than normal and speed up sexual development in girls.

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