



Frequently Asked Questions about Obesity

What is obesity?

Obesity means that you have an unhealthy amount of body fat. Everyone needs some body fat, but too much fat can cause health problems.

Overweight and obesity are defined using a tool called *Body Mass Index (BMI)*. BMI is a way of estimating total body fat for most people. The easiest way to find out your BMI is to use a BMI table for adults (at right). There is also a handy BMI calculator at the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute's web site (see resources at the end of this FAQ). To find your BMI, you need to know your height and your weight. You can also take your weight in pounds, divide that number by your height in inches squared, and multiply the result by 703 to get your BMI.

Note:
This chart is for adults (age 20 years and older)
Source: Surgeon General's Healthy Weight Advice for Consumers, 2001

FIGURE 1: ADULT BODY MASS INDEX

$$BMI = \left\{ \frac{\text{WEIGHT (pounds)}}{\text{HEIGHT (inches)}^2} \right\} \times 703$$

Height in Feet and Inches	Weight in Pounds													
	120	130	140	150	160	170	180	190	200	210	220	230	240	250
4'6	29	31	34	36	39	41	43	46	48	51	53	56	58	60
4'8	27	29	31	34	36	38	40	43	45	47	49	52	54	56
4'10	25	27	29	31	34	36	38	40	42	44	46	48	50	52
5'0	23	25	27	29	31	33	35	37	39	41	43	45	47	49
5'2	22	24	26	27	29	31	33	35	37	38	40	42	44	46
5'4	21	22	24	26	28	29	31	33	34	36	38	40	41	43
5'6	19	21	23	24	26	27	29	31	32	34	36	37	39	40
5'8	18	20	21	23	24	26	27	29	30	32	34	35	37	38
5'10	17	19	20	22	23	24	26	27	29	30	32	33	35	36
6'0	16	18	19	20	22	23	24	26	27	28	30	31	33	34
6'2	15	17	18	19	21	22	23	24	26	27	28	30	31	32
6'4	15	16	17	18	20	21	22	23	24	26	27	28	29	30
6'6	14	15	16	17	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	27	28	29
6'8	13	14	15	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	28

Healthy Weight
Overweight
Obese

If your BMI is 25-29.9, you are in the "overweight" category. If your BMI is 30 or above, you are in the "obese" category. There are three classes of obesity:

- Class I obesity — BMI of 30-34.9
- Class II obesity— of 35-39.9
- Class III obesity— of 40 and higher

In general, the higher your BMI is above 25, the greater your weight-related health risks.

What causes being overweight and obesity?

The main causes of being overweight or obese are eating too much and/or not being active enough. If you eat more calories than your body burns up, the extra calories are stored as fat. Everyone has some stored fat. Too much fat results in being overweight or obese. Other factors that may affect your weight include your genes (obesity tends to run in families), your metabolism (how your body processes food), your racial/ethnic group, and your age. Sometimes an illness or medicine can contribute to weight gain. Researchers are studying the causes of obesity to learn more about how to prevent and reverse it.

How many women are obese?

According to the Surgeon General of the United States, overweight and obesity are increasing in both men and women. The latest estimates are that 34 percent of U.S. adults aged 20 to 74 years are overweight, and an additional 27 percent are obese. About half of all women aged 20 to 74 are overweight or obese. The percentages of obese women among African American, Native American and Mexican American women are even higher.

What are some of the serious health problems linked to obesity?

If you are overweight or obese, you are more likely to develop health problems such as heart disease, diabetes, and some types of cancer. The good news is that losing weight can improve how your heart works, lower your blood pressure, improve your cholesterol levels, and lower your chances of getting other health problems.

Overweight and obesity are linked to:

- Heart disease. Heart disease is the leading cause of death for both men and women in the United States. Heart disease includes heart attack, heart failure, and *angina* (chest pain caused by reduced blood flow to the heart).
- Stroke. A stroke is sometimes called a "brain attack." Most strokes are caused by a blood clot blocking an artery that takes blood to the brain.
- Diabetes. Overweight people are twice as likely to develop type 2 diabetes as people who are not overweight. Type 2 diabetes reduces your body's ability to control your blood sugar. It is a major cause of early death, heart disease, kidney disease, stroke, and blindness. If you have type 2 diabetes, losing weight and being more physically active can help control your blood sugar levels. You may also be able to reduce the amount of medicine that you need.
- Cancer of the gallbladder, breast, uterus, cervix, and ovaries (for women). Overweight men are at greater risk for developing cancer of the colon, rectum, and prostate.
- Gallstones or gallbladder disease. Gallbladder disease and gallstones are more common if you are overweight. Your risk of disease increases as your weight increases. But weight loss itself, particularly rapid weight loss or loss of a large amount of weight, can actually increase your chances of getting gallstones. Modest, slow weight loss of about 1 pound a week is less likely to cause gallstones.
- Osteoarthritis (wearing away of the joints). Osteoarthritis is a common joint disorder that most often affects the joints in your knees, hips, and lower back. Extra weight puts extra pressure on these joints and wears away the cartilage (tissue that cushions the joints) that normally protects them. Weight loss may improve the symptoms of osteoarthritis.
- Gout (joint pain caused by excess *uric acid*). Gout is a joint disease caused by high levels of uric acid in the blood. Uric acid sometimes forms crystals that are deposited in the joints. Gout is more common in overweight people. If you have a history of gout, check with your doctor before trying to lose weight. Some diets may lead to an attack of gout in people who have high levels of uric acid or who have had gout before.

- Breathing problems, including sleep apnea (interrupted breathing during sleep). Sleep apnea is a serious condition that can cause a person to stop breathing for short periods during sleep and to snore heavily. Sleep apnea may cause daytime sleepiness and even heart failure. The risk for sleep apnea increases with higher body weights. Weight loss usually improves sleep apnea.
- High blood cholesterol. High levels of total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol ("bad cholesterol") and *triglycerides* (another type of fat in the blood) can lead to heart disease. Obesity is also linked to low levels of HDL cholesterol ("good cholesterol"). Weight loss can improve your cholesterol levels.
- High blood pressure. High blood pressure is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke. Obese adults are twice as likely to have high blood pressure as those who are at a healthy weight. Weight loss can lower your blood pressure.
- Complications of pregnancy. Obesity increases the risks of high blood pressure and a type of diabetes that develops during pregnancy. Obese women are more likely to have problems with labor and delivery.
- Irregular menstrual cycles and infertility. Abdominal obesity is linked to *polycystic ovary syndrome*, a cause of infertility in women.
- Psychological and social effects, such as depression and discrimination. One of the most painful aspects of obesity may be the emotional suffering it causes. American society places great emphasis on physical appearance, often equating attractiveness with slimness, especially in women. The messages, intended or not, make overweight people feel unattractive. Obese people often face prejudice or discrimination at work, at school, while looking for a job, and in social situations. Feelings of rejection, shame, or depression are common.

What are metabolic syndrome and abdominal obesity?

The latest national guidelines for preventing and managing high blood cholesterol describe a group of risk factors called *metabolic syndrome*. Abdominal obesity, defined as a large waist size (more than 35 inches in women and more than 40 inches in men), is part of the syndrome. Metabolic syndrome is linked to *insulin resistance* (which can lead to diabetes) and a high risk of getting heart disease. You have metabolic syndrome if you have at least three of these risk factors:

- a large waist measurement (abdominal obesity) of over 35 inches for women
- high triglycerides (150 or above)
- a low HDL or "good" cholesterol level (for women, under 50)
- blood pressure of 130/85 or higher
- fasting glucose (blood sugar) of 110 or higher.

Improved diet, weight loss, and increased physical activity are very important if you have metabolic syndrome.

How can I improve my health if I am obese?

The key to reaching and staying at a healthy (or healthier) body weight is to balance healthful eating with regular physical activity. The Surgeon General suggests the following steps to better health.

- Aim for a healthy weight. If you are overweight or obese, losing just 10 percent of your body weight can improve your health. Lose weight gradually — 1/2 to 2 pounds per week. Do not go on fad diets. These can often hurt your health. Ask your doctor about the best weight loss plan for you.
- Be active. Be physically active for at least 30 minutes on most days of the week. Regular exercise is very important in weight control and has many other health benefits.

Some examples of good ways to exercise include walking, yard work, housework, and dancing. More vigorous exercise can raise your HDL ("good cholesterol") level and make your heart stronger. This kind of activity is called "aerobic" and includes jogging, swimming, jumping rope, or brisk walking or bicycling. Be sure to build up your activity level gradually over a period of several weeks. Check with your doctor before starting a vigorous exercise program.

- Eat well. Eat smaller portions, eat more foods that are lower in fat and calories, and follow the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. These guidelines call for eating plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Try to eat five servings of fruits and vegetables every day. Choose foods that are low in saturated fat and eat fewer foods that are high in sugar or salt.

If you are overweight or obese, talk with your doctor or health care provider about ways to improve your health. If you already have health problems related to obesity, such as high blood pressure or diabetes, follow the treatment plan prescribed by your doctor.

For more information...

For more information on obesity contact the National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) at (800) 994-WOMAN or the following organizations:

Office of the Surgeon General, OS, HHS

Phone Number(s): (301) 443-6496

Web Site: <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/Default.htm>

The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity

<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity/default.htm>

National Institute of Diabetes & Digestive & Kidney Diseases (NIDDK)

Phone Number(s): (301) 654-4415

Weight Loss and Control Topics: <http://www.niddk.nih.gov/health/nutrit/nutrit.htm>

Web Site: <http://www.niddk.nih.gov/>

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute Information Center (NHLBI)

Phone Number(s): (301) 592-8573 (Publications) or (800) 575-9355 (Blood Pressure & Cholesterol Information)

NHLBI Aim for a Healthy Weight (Obesity Education Initiative):

http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/lose_wt/index.htm

Web Site: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/infoctr/index.htm>

NHLBI's BMI Calculator

<http://www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi/bmicalc.htm>

NHLBI's BMI Tables

http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/guidelines/obesity/bmi_tbl.htm

National Library of Medicine

Phone Number(s): (888) 346-3656

MEDLINE plus links to obesity information:

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/obesity.html>

Web Site: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion

Phone Number(s): (888) 232-4674

Nutrition and Physical Activity: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/index.htm>

Web Site: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/>

President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports

Phone Number(s): (800) 258-8146

Web Site: <http://www.fitness.gov/aboutpcpfs/aboutpcpfs.html>

All material contained in the FAQs is free of copyright restrictions, and may be copied, reproduced, or duplicated without permission of the Office on Women's Health in the Department of Health and Human Services; citation of the source is appreciated.

January 2002