



Understanding Obesity



Background

Obesity is a complex chronic disease that affects over 42% of adults and 19% of 2-19 year old youth in the United States. Although explicit bias against those with obesity may be decreasing in the United States, it remains one of the most robust prejudices that Americans hold. Accurate communication about obesity is essential to reduce weight bias and center obesity as a major public health priority. Ideally, clearing up misconceptions about the disease and informing providers, media, and the public about obesity will lead to an increase in the diagnosis and treatment of obesity and a decrease in the stigmatization of the disease.

Talking About Obesity

The language we use to describe obesity emphasizes that obesity is a disease, like cancer or diabetes. Therefore, we talk about people with obesity in the same way that we talk about people with cancer; we do not talk about a cancer person, or a diabetic person. The term “an obese person” is a label that perpetuates stigmatization and its adverse effects on physical and mental health. For example, we say, “She has obesity,” not “She is obese.”

Key Facts

- A What is Obesity?**
Obesity is a complex, chronic disease characterized by an excessive accumulation of body fat that impairs health.
- B How is Obesity Diagnosed?**
Obesity is usually diagnosed by body mass index, but BMI has its limitations; providers may also measure waist circumference or waist-to-hip ratios.

- C Why is Obesity Important?**
Obesity increases a person’s risk of chronic disease and death; minority populations are disproportionately affected.
- D How Prevalent is Obesity?**
Obesity is very common; rates have risen in the past several decades and they are expected to continue to rise.
- E Metabolic Syndrome and Obesity**
Abdominal obesity is one component of metabolic syndrome, which refers to a group of risk factors that raise a person’s risk of heart disease, stroke, and other illnesses.
- F Causes**
Obesity is influenced by behavioral, economic, environmental, and genetic factors, as well as other factors that scientists have yet to fully discover.
- G Common Comorbidities**
Obesity can affect many systems in the body and may lead to other chronic diseases, mental illness, sleep problems, or joint pain.
- H Obesity Management and Treatment**
There are many treatments that can help a person manage obesity, including lifestyle modifications, behavioral modification, antiobesity medications, and bariatric surgery.
- I Personal Impact of Obesity**
People with obesity are often exposed to damaging weight-related stigma and discrimination which can be harmful to emotional and physical health.

