



# FAST FACTS



## Mental Health and Obesity

*OBESITY is a complex chronic disease in which abnormal or excessive accumulation of body fat impairs health. Adult obesity rates have more than doubled since the 1980s — in the U.S. today, obesity affects over 42% of adults and 19% of youth.<sup>1,2</sup> Obesity and its related complications are major drivers of rising healthcare costs, diminished health-related quality of life, and the recent decline in U.S. life expectancy. This fact sheet is part of a series designed to provide basic information about the science of obesity and current strategies to address it.*

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Mental illness and obesity often co-occur and certain factors like adverse childhood experiences may contribute to both.
- When severe mental illness and obesity co-occur, it is important for providers to treat both diseases as chronic and interacting.
- Weight bias and discrimination can contribute to poor mental health, independent of weight.

### LEARN MORE

[\*National Alliance on Mental Illness\*](#)

### Mental Health and Obesity

**Mental health and obesity are related in complex ways and have been shown to affect each other.** For example, people with depression are more likely to experience obesity and people with obesity are more likely to experience depression.<sup>3</sup>

- High rates of obesity have been studied in populations with mood disorders, schizophrenia, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and trauma. Factors that affect both mental illness and obesity are:<sup>4</sup>
  - Inflammation
  - Coping behaviors
  - Neurotransmitter levels
  - Sociodemographic factors like poverty
- Obesity has also been associated with anxiety disorders and eating disorders, specifically bulimia and binge-eating disorder.<sup>5,6</sup>

### Obesity and Psychiatric Treatment

When a patient has both severe mental illness and obesity, their conditions must be treated as unique, interacting chronic diseases.<sup>7</sup>

- A number of psychiatric medications have weight gain as a side effect, including some anti-depressants, mood stabilizers, and anti-psychotics.<sup>7</sup>
- It is recommended that patients with both severe mental illness and obesity be treated with weight-neutral psychiatric medication or psychiatric medication with a side effect of weight loss.<sup>7</sup>
- If psychiatric patients with obesity gain weight or do not lose weight after a change in medication, behavioral weight loss programs have been shown to be appropriate for this population.<sup>7</sup>
- If patients continue to experience difficulty losing or maintaining a healthy weight, pharmacotherapy for weight loss can be considered and, in some patients, bariatric surgery may be appropriate.<sup>7</sup>

## Weight Bias and Mental Health

In addition to the links between obesity and mental illness, experiences of weight-based discrimination have also been found to be associated with poor mental health. Research shows that weight bias is related to mental health independently; the relationship is not mediated by obesity.<sup>8</sup>



**STOP**  
STRATEGIES TO  
OVERCOME & PREVENT  
**OBESITY**  
ALLIANCE

## Adverse Childhood Experiences

**Obesity and mental health are affected by many of the same contributing factors.** One of these is adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

- The odds of adolescents having overweight, obesity, or severe obesity increase if they have experienced adverse childhood experiences such as abuse, domestic violence, or parental incarceration.<sup>9</sup>
- Young adults who experience adverse childhood experiences have also been found to experience higher prevalences of depression, antisocial behavior, and drug use.<sup>10</sup>

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