

Patient information from the BMJ Group

# Obesity - how to lose weight

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If you're obese, it means you weigh much more than is healthy for you. It happens because you eat more calories than your body uses. The extra calories are stored as fat.

Losing weight isn't easy. You'll need to change the way you eat and the amount of exercise you take. But if you make these changes, you'll feel healthier and be able to get more out of life.

We've brought together the best and most up-to-date research about obesity to see what works best when you're losing weight. You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which approach is best for you.

## What is obesity?

Being obese is more than being just a few kilograms or pounds overweight. Obesity can cause health problems such as diabetes, high blood pressure, arthritis, and heart disease.

When doctors talk about a 'healthy' weight, they mean a weight that lowers your risk of getting serious health problems, such as heart disease. It's not based on how thin you would like to look.

Most doctors use the body mass index (BMI for short) to work out whether you're a healthy weight for your height. Your BMI is a number worked out from your height and weight. Doctors say someone is obese if their BMI is 30 or higher.

You may feel that you don't eat a lot, and think that your weight problems must be caused by something else, such as a slow metabolism. But you can only become obese by eating more calories than your body uses. Unfortunately, you only have to eat slightly more calories than you use to put on weight. If you ate just 100 extra calories (one-and-a-half biscuits a day, you would put on 4 kilograms (nearly 9 pounds) in a year.

## What are the symptoms?

If you are obese, you carry a lot of extra fat on your body. Most of the extra fat will lie around your waist and chest or on your hips and buttocks. Men who are obese tend to have big waists. Women tend to carry extra weight on their hips.

Having a heavy body can be uncomfortable and make you feel bad. Moving around may make you out of breath. If you have a lot of fat around your neck and chest, you may need to take short, shallow breaths. The extra fat makes it difficult for air to flow easily in and out of your lungs.

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If you find it hard to breathe, you may not be getting enough oxygen into your blood. This can make you feel tired. Carrying extra weight can be tiring too. Everyday activities, like walking upstairs, may become a struggle.

Being overweight puts pressure on your joints and muscles. You may find your ankles and knees are sore, or your back aches.

If you have folds of fat, you're more likely to get a skin infection underneath the skin folds. The skin under large breasts and buttocks can rub and become sore.

Some women find that their periods become irregular or stop. The extra fat can upset the balance of hormones in your body.

### What treatments work?

To lose weight, you need to take in fewer calories each day than you use. You can do this by following a weight loss programme.

Your weight has probably crept up over many years. It's best to lose weight the same way: slowly and steadily. You should aim to lose 0.5 kilograms to 1 kilogram (1 to 2 pounds) each week. Work with your GP or practice nurse to set yourself short-term, realistic goals.

### Weight loss programmes

You have the best chance of losing weight if you combine a low-calorie diet and exercise programme with behavioural therapy to help change the way you eat and exercise.

This can help you lose about 5 percent to 10 percent of your weight in about six months. That may not sound much, but it lowers your risk of health problems and will help you feel better.

A **low-calorie diet** means you eat fewer calories. This could mean eating smaller portions, or choosing foods with fewer calories. You'll eat 500 to 1,000 fewer calories each day.

The more **exercise** you do, the more calories you use. You'll probably need to do at least 30 minutes of physical activity on most days. The goal is to use about 2,000 extra calories a week.

**Behavioural therapy** includes ways to help you change the way you eat and your exercise habits. You have sessions with a health professional and learn to think and act differently so that you can stick to your weight loss programme.

If you follow a good weight loss programme, you can expect to lose about half a kilogram (1 pound) a week for up to six months. Some people lose less, some more. In one study people lost an average of 8 kilograms (18 pounds) in 20 weeks.

Research shows that following a **structured weight loss programme** works best. You're more likely to lose weight and keep the weight off if your programme includes:

- Regular contact with a health professional

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- Support from other people who are losing weight
- A low-calorie diet that lists the kinds of foods to eat and those to avoid
- Weighing yourself regularly
- A personalised exercise plan
- A plan for how best to keep weight off when you've reached your target weight.

Bear in mind that exercise alone won't help you to lose much weight. You need to cut calories, too. It takes a lot of exercise to burn off food. You'd need to run for about an hour to work off a piece of chocolate cake.

Home videos or self-help books probably won't help as much as meeting regularly with a health professional, to talk through your progress.

It's better to lose weight slowly and keep up the changes to your lifestyle. Crash diets or one-time bursts of exercise don't help to control your weight in the long term. The longer a weight loss programme lasts, the more likely it is that you'll keep weight off.

Once you have lost weight, you may need help to keep it off. The most important thing seems to be regular contact with a health professional. It also helps to have support from your family or partner, or to join a self-help group.

One study found that a regular walking programme (about two to three hours a week) can help you keep your weight down.

### Other treatments

You may have heard about medicines that can help you lose weight. Only one is licensed for use in the UK. It is called orlistat (brand name Xenical). There's a lower dose version of orlistat that you can buy from pharmacies, called Alli. There is some evidence that orlistat can help you lose weight, but it's important to realise that you will still need to stick to a low calorie diet and follow an exercise programme. Otherwise it won't work. Also, it can have side effects.

There are other diet pills, but they are not available in the UK, or are not recommended for use. Some of them may be dangerous. If you are considering taking any diet pills or herbal treatments, be sure to discuss them with your doctor first. They might interfere with medicines you are taking for other conditions.

### What will happen to me?

If you're obese, the extra fat on your body won't go away by itself. Losing weight and keeping the weight off can be difficult. But it will probably be easier if you get help from your doctor and follow a weight loss programme.

Here's what we know happens to most people who follow a weight loss programme.

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- Most people lose about 5 percent to 10 percent of their weight within six months if they follow a programme that includes diet and exercise.
- After six months, you won't lose weight as quickly and you may stop losing weight.
- Keeping the weight off can be a struggle. Most people put back on at least some of the weight they lose.
- Your best chance of keeping the weight off is to stay in a weight loss programme, with regular support from a health professional.

If you stay obese, you have a higher chance of getting serious health problems, including heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and arthritis.

### Where to get more help?

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, which advises the government on healthcare, has produced guidelines about how people who are overweight or obese can expect to be treated on the NHS. For more information, see Obesity: understanding NICE guidance (<http://guidance.nice.org.uk/CG43>), available on the NICE website.

We've looked at the best and most up-to-date research to produce this leaflet. For a full list of sources, and more detail about obesity, visit <http://besthealth.bmj.com>.

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