Understanding obesity

What is obesity and what causes it?

What is obesity?
The term obesity is used when someone has extra body fat that affects their health.\(^1\)

How is it measured?
Obesity is usually determined by using the body mass index, or BMI which is calculated by using a person’s height and weight. Sometimes doctors also measure a person’s waist size because belly fat is a health concern. They may also look at someone’s age, family background and general health.\(^2\)

What are the causes of obesity?
Some people assume that obesity is only about personal choices, but this is an oversimplification and in many cases is not the full story.\(^3\) There are different things that can contribute to weight gain, including how our bodies work (biology), the environments that we live in, and our lifestyle and life experiences.\(^4\) It is important to understand that some of these are outside of people’s control.

Our bodies (biology)
- Genetics and family history mean that some people are more likely to gain weight or find it harder to lose weight than others.\(^5\)
- Some medications and illnesses can lead to weight gain especially those that increase appetite or reduce the ability to be active.\(^6\)

Our environments
- High energy foods are everywhere and advertised in attractive ways. They are often cheap and quick, but less healthy and can be very hard to resist.\(^7\)
- Some communities don’t have safe places to be active (e.g. green spaces and walking paths). Some also lack good public transport options, so people need to drive.\(^8\)
- Not all areas of Australia have easy access to good foods, sport/physical activity programs or health services.\(^9\)

Our lifestyle
- We eat out more, eat more processed foods and get more take away meals than we used to.\(^10\)
- We move less and spend less time outside as part of our normal activities.\(^11\)
- Many people don’t get enough good sleep which can affect energy levels, hormones and cravings.\(^12\)

Our life experiences
- High stress situations, mental health challenges and/or traumatic experiences can affect the way our body works and the foods that we crave.\(^13\)
- Our experiences at a young age can influence how healthy we are as adults.\(^14\)
- The quality of education and support we have in the community can influence our choices and how healthy we are.\(^15\)

Why is obesity a health risk?
There are different ways that obesity can affect someone’s health and wellbeing, these can include:
- risks of developing diseases like diabetes, heart disease and cancer.\(^16\)
- challenges with mental health, mobility, fertility and arthritis.\(^17\)
- harmful discrimination which can impact people’s mental health as well as education and employment opportunities.\(^18\)
Usually, health risks increase with the more weight that someone gains and the longer that they have obesity.\(^1\) However, it is important to understand that everyone is different, and obesity will affect people in different ways.\(^2\) Not everyone with a higher weight or BMI will have serious health problems.\(^3\)

Who is affected by obesity?

Obesity affects about one out of three adults and one in twelve school-aged children.\(^2\) It affects people from all different backgrounds, areas of Australia and levels of education and wealth. We do know that some groups are more affected than others though. For example, people living in remote and rural areas, Indigenous people, and people with below average income levels are more affected.\(^3\)

References

26. Images used in this brochure were taken from the Weight Issues Network (WWIN) image library. Thanks to WA Health, World Obesity Federation, Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) and Obesity Canada for making these respectable images available and free for use.
27. WWN Image Library: https://www.google.com/og/htd/0k6/1W17L0ENV59IFnP5YTD1MRHPHd59Z
30. Obesity Canada Image Bank: https://www.obesityaction.ca/resources/image_bank/