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PDF generated on July 20, 2016 from

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## **Obesity, Weight, and Cancer Risk [1]**

**This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 01/2016**

More than two-thirds of American adults are overweight and obese. This means that they have too much body fat compared to lean body tissue, such as muscle. Many factors cause people to become overweight or obese, including genetic, hormonal, environmental, emotional, and cultural factors. People who are overweight or obese have a higher risk of many serious health conditions, including type-2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease. Being overweight or obese is also associated with an increased risk of cancer.

### **Understanding weight gain and cancer risk**

Several studies have explored why being overweight or obese may increase cancer risk and growth. The possible reasons that obesity is linked with cancer include:

- Increased levels of insulin and insulin growth factor-1 (IGF-1), which may help some cancers develop
- Chronic, low-level inflammation, which is more common in people who are obese and is linked with an increased cancer risk
- Higher amounts of estrogen produced by fat tissue, which can drive the development of some cancers, such as breast and endometrial cancers

- Fat cells may also effect processes that regulate cancer cell growth.

How your weight changes throughout your life may also affect your risk for cancer. Studies have shown that the following factors can affect your cancer risk:

- High birth weight
- Gaining weight as an adult
- Losing and regaining weight repeatedly

Research suggests that maintaining a healthy weight is associated with a lower risk of cancer and of cancer recurrence in cancer survivors.

## **Types of cancer linked to overweight or obesity**

Being overweight or obese has been linked to some cancers:

- Breast
- Colorectal
- Uterine
- Kidney
- Head and neck
- Esophageal
- Pancreatic
- Endometrium (lining of the uterus)

- Prostate
- Gallbladder
- Thyroid

## **Measuring weight gain**

Obesity is often measured with body mass index (BMI): the ratio of a person's weight and height and waist measurements. A normal BMI is between 18.5 and 24.9. A BMI between 25 and 29.5 is considered overweight, while a BMI of 30 or higher is obese. In addition, people with larger waist measurements have a higher risk of various diseases, such as heart disease. A normal waist measurement is under 40 inches for men and under 35 inches for women.

## **Weight management tips**

To control weight gain, be aware of what you eat and how much you exercise. You should also make healthy choices about what you eat and drink. This can be challenging because eating a high-calorie diet is typical in the United States today. The reasons for this include a plentiful, relatively low-cost food supply and large portions. Here are some tips to help:

- Eat more vegetables, fruits, lean protein, and whole grains. Some types of food, such as broth-based soups, also help a person feel "full" faster.
- Limit foods and beverages that are high in sugar, such as juice and soda.
- Eat and drink only as many calories as you need to maintain a healthy weight and support your level of physical activity.
- Aim for 30 to 60 minutes per day of moderate to intense physical activity on most days. But even a small increase in physical activity has benefits.

## **Suggestions for people who are overweight or obese**

If you are currently overweight or obese, it is best to start by taking steps to lose weight through nutrition and exercise. Aim to lose 5% to 10% of your body weight as your first goal. Although this amount may seem small, research shows that even losing 5% to 10% of your weight is beneficial. Most hospitals and health care organizations have professionals—such as

dietitians—on staff who can provide weight management counseling and treatment.

Sometimes nutritional changes and increasing physical activity aren't enough. But there are other steps you can take. The National Institutes of Health approach to obesity treatment includes:

- **A change in lifestyle behaviors.** First, change behaviors to reduce the amount of food eaten and increase physical activity before considering other weight loss treatments. A registered dietitian, exercise physiologist, clinical psychologist, or doctor who specializes in weight loss can help.
- **Behavior change support.** For many, being overweight or obese is more complex than simply eating too much and exercising too little. It's important to get support when you are trying to lose weight. Most weight loss programs include sessions with a dietitian or weight loss specialist to help you make healthy lifestyle changes and stick with them over time.
- **Medications.** Weight loss drugs are usually only recommended when a combination of diet, exercise, and behavior change support have not worked. Or, if you have other serious health conditions from being obese.
- **Surgery.** Weight loss surgery, or bariatric surgery, is a term for a variety of procedures that make a person's stomach smaller. This may be an option for people with a BMI of 40 or higher. Or, for those with a BMI of 35 or higher who have another serious health condition related to obesity.

### **Questions to ask a medical professional about weight loss:**

- Am I at an unhealthy weight?
- How is my excess weight harming my health?
- How will losing weight improve my health?
- How much weight do I need to lose?
- How much weight should I lose each week?

- What programs and treatments are available to help me lose weight?
- Can you recommend professionals who can help me develop a weight loss program?
- Where can I find information on healthy eating?
- Where can I find information on exercise?

## More Information

[Prevention and Healthy Living](#) [3]

[Physical Activity and Cancer Risk](#) [4]

## Additional Resources

Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics: [Your Health and Your Weight](#) [5]

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [Overweight and Obesity](#) [6]

National Cancer Institute: [Obesity and Cancer Risk](#) [7]

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## Links

- [1] <http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/prevention-and-healthy-living/obesity-and-cancer/obesity-weight-and-cancer-risk>
- [2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>
- [3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24868>
- [4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24995>
- [5] <http://www.eatright.org/resource/health/weight-loss/your-health-and-your-weight/your-health-and-your-weight>
- [6] <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/index.html>
- [7] <http://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/causes-prevention/risk/obesity/obesity-fact-sheet>