

Obesity Basics

Working With Your Genes and Metabolism

Did you know that obesity makes you more likely to have high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes than those at a normal weight?

These risk factors can speed up the progression of atherosclerosis, the buildup of plaque in arteries. Atherosclerosis can cause serious harm to your cardiovascular system and increase your risk for heart disease and stroke.

Of course, obesity can also increase your risk even if you don't have any other risk factors, because it actually changes the structure of your heart and makes your heart work even harder.

How Is Obesity Diagnosed?

Obesity is generally measured using the body mass index (BMI). The BMI formula is a helpful measure of body composition because it provides a good estimate of body fat based on your height and weight.

Measuring your waistline is also helpful. For women, a waistline 35 inches or higher is considered high-risk for abdominal obesity, potentially increasing the risk for coronary heart disease (CHD). For men, a waistline 40 inches or higher is considered high-risk.

What Causes Obesity?

Research is pointing to another cause of obesity—genetics. The rate at which your body converts food to energy can vary from person to person. Your metabolism can affect how your body processes the fat in your diet. While genes can sometimes determine if you will develop certain conditions that can lead to obesity disorders, in some cases genetics may merely increase the chance of becoming obese.

The Keys to Treating Obesity

If you are overweight or obese, talk to your doctor about the health risks associated with carrying extra weight. Your doctor can also help you figure out ways to lose weight safely. The first step may be to get more exercise and to change your diet to include more fiber, fruits, and vegetables, and avoid foods that are higher in saturated fats and cholesterol. It's the lifestyle choices you make every day that can have a big impact.

Sometimes, though, you might need some extra help in achieving your weight goal. Currently, there are a few types of drugs approved by the FDA for weight loss and weight maintenance. Some drugs work by blocking an enzyme that helps break down fat. This prevents the fat from being absorbed. Other medications can be used for short-term weight loss treatment (12 weeks or less). These drugs help curb hunger by increasing levels of hormones in the brain that can control your appetite.

According to the National Institutes of Health, the normal BMI range is 18.5 to 24.9. A BMI of 25 to 29.9 is labeled overweight, and a BMI of 30 or above is called obese.