

Understanding NICE guidance

Information for people who use NHS services

Treatment for people who are overweight or obese

NICE advises the NHS on caring for people with specific conditions or diseases. It also advises the NHS, other organisations and the public on preventing ill health and promoting good health.

This booklet is about NHS care and treatment in England and Wales of people who are overweight or obese. It explains guidance (advice) from NICE (the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence). It is written for people who may need help with their weight problems but it may also be useful for their families or carers or for anyone with an interest in obesity.

The booklet aims to help you understand the care and treatment options that should be available in the NHS. It does not describe the tests or treatments you may have in detail. You can discuss these with a healthcare professional – for example, your GP, a nurse at the GP surgery, your health visitor, a school nurse or a pharmacist. There are examples of questions you could ask throughout this booklet to help you with this. Some sources of further information and support are on page 12.

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This booklet describes the advice in the NICE guidance on the treatment of overweight and obesity, including:

- how staff in GP surgeries and hospitals should assess whether people are overweight or obese
- what staff in GP surgeries and hospitals should do to help people lose weight
- care for people whose weight puts their health at risk.

There is another booklet, called 'Preventing obesity and staying a healthy weight', that describes the advice NICE has given on:

- how people can make sure they and their children stay at a healthy weight
- how health professionals, local authorities and communities, childcare providers, schools and employers should make it easier for people to improve their diet and become more active.

For details about how to get copies of both booklets, see page 12.

Your care

Your care should take into account your personal needs and preferences, and you have the right to be fully informed and to make decisions in partnership with your healthcare team. To help with this, your healthcare team should give you information you can understand and that is relevant to your circumstances. All healthcare professionals should treat you with respect, sensitivity and understanding, and explain obesity and the treatments for it simply and clearly.

This information, and any discussions you have with your healthcare team, should include details of the possible benefits and risks of particular treatments. You can ask any questions you want to and can always change your mind as your treatment progresses or your condition or circumstances change. Your own preference for a particular treatment is important and your healthcare team should support your choice of treatment wherever possible.

Your treatment and care, and the information you are given about it, should take account of any religious, ethnic or cultural needs you may have. It should also take into account any additional factors, such as physical or learning disabilities, sight or hearing problems, or difficulties with reading or speaking English. Your healthcare team should be able to arrange an interpreter or an advocate (someone who supports you in making your views known) if needed.

If you agree, your carers and relatives should have the chance to be involved in decisions about your care. Carers and relatives also have the right to the information and support they need in their roles as carers.

If people are unable to understand a particular issue or are not able to make decisions for themselves, healthcare professionals should follow the advice that the Department of Health has produced about this. You can find this by going to the Department of Health website (www.dh.gov.uk) and searching for information on 'consent' and 'capacity'.

If you are over 16 you can generally give your own agreement to treatment. If you are under 16 and you fully understand all the information you may be able to give your own agreement; if you are too young or cannot fully understand, your parents or carers will also need to agree to treatment.

Obesity and being overweight

Obesity is a health issue. It can contribute to a range of problems, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoarthritis and some cancers. Healthcare professionals use a measure called body mass index (BMI) to help decide if you are overweight or obese. Your BMI is your weight in kilogrammes (kg) divided by the square of your height in metres (m²). There's a BMI calculator on the NHS Direct website (www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/interactiveTools/bmi.aspx).

What BMI means for adults

- Between 18.5 and 24.9 – healthy weight.
- Between 25 and 29.9 – overweight.
- 30 or more – obese.

How your weight is assessed

If you think you are overweight and go to see a healthcare professional, such as your GP or a nurse at your GP surgery, they should talk to you about your concerns. They may then ask to check your height and weight, and use these to calculate your BMI.

Your waist measurement may also be taken. This is because, if two people have the same BMI, the one with the bigger waist measurement is more likely to develop health problems as a result of being overweight. If you are a man, your chance of developing health problems is higher if your waist measurement is more than 94 cm (37 inches), and higher still if it is more than 102 cm (40 inches). If you are a woman, your chance of developing health problems is higher if your waist measurement is more than 80 cm (31.5 inches), and higher still if it is more than 88 cm (34.5 inches).

The healthcare professional may also ask to check your weight and height if you visit them for some other reason, and they think you may be overweight.

If you are very muscular, your BMI may not give an accurate idea of whether you need to lose weight.

If you are of Asian background you may be at higher risk of some health problems related to being overweight or obese, so you may be advised to try to lose weight even if your BMI is below 25.

For children and young people, a different system is used. The healthcare professional should check their BMI against special charts that take account of their age and gender to decide if they are overweight or obese.

Your healthcare professional should also ask you:

- whether your weight is causing you any problems
- about your diet and how much physical activity you do
- if there is anything else that might be contributing to your putting on weight, such as problems in your personal life.

They should also check whether you have any medical conditions that could put you at higher risk of problems related to being overweight. You may be offered a blood pressure check and some blood tests, for example, to check cholesterol and blood sugar levels. Children and young people who are seriously overweight may be offered an appointment at hospital for some of these tests.

You may be asked to come back for another appointment, perhaps to discuss test results. This should be with the same healthcare professional if possible.

All this information will help the healthcare professional decide what types of advice and support could be useful for you. They should talk to you about the possibilities and what is involved, including:

- the benefits of eating a healthier diet and doing more physical activity to help you lose weight
- how you feel about making these changes
- any questions you have.

If you don't feel ready to make changes, you can take up this offer of help later on if you change your mind.

If you have health problems related to being overweight or obese, such as type 2 diabetes or high blood pressure, these should be treated when they are diagnosed. Treatment should not be put off until you have lost weight, but losing weight may help these problems.

Questions you might like to ask

- Please tell me more about my BMI and the problems being overweight or obese may cause.
- Can you tell me about any organisations in my local area that could help me do something about my weight?
- Can you provide any information for my family and carers, or tell me where I could get it?

If you think that your care does not match what is described in this booklet, please talk to a member of your healthcare team.

How much weight should you lose?

For most people, losing a small amount of weight – about 5% – can have benefits, such as reducing their risk of developing diabetes or lowering their blood pressure. Losing 5% of your weight means losing 5 kg if you weigh 100 kg, or 11 pounds if you weigh 16 stone. Your healthcare professional should help you set a target.

Help to change your lifestyle

You and your healthcare professional will decide together what treatment or other help is best for you. This will take into account your preferences and your general health and fitness.

If you are ready to tackle your weight problem, you should be offered regular appointments. If possible, you should see the same person each time – usually, a nurse at your GP surgery or your GP. This person will offer you support and advice.

Most people should first be offered advice and help with changing their lifestyle – that is, reducing the amount they eat and becoming more active. The NICE guidance says that getting support from your family and friends will make it easier to change your lifestyle.

If you are helping your child to lose weight, this will be easier if the whole family makes the same lifestyle changes. If you are also overweight you will be encouraged to try to lose weight at the same time as your child. Parents should usually take responsibility for making changes to their child's diet, and encouraging them to become more active, particularly if the child is under 12. But the preferences and views of the child or young person should also be taken into account when deciding what changes to make.

How much physical activity should you be doing?

All adults should try to do at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on 5 or more days a week. (Moderate activity makes your breathing and heartbeat get faster and makes you feel warm.) This lowers your risk of developing medical problems such as diabetes and heart disease. But many people need to do 45 to 60 minutes of moderate activity a day to stop them gaining weight. If you have lost weight, you may need to do as much as 60 to 90 minutes a day to stop you putting it back on again. This activity can be in a single session or several lasting 10 minutes or more. You could try:

- activities such as brisk walking, cycling or climbing stairs, which can be part of your everyday routine
- gardening
- going to the gym or an exercise class, or swimming.

Your choice of activities should be based on what you enjoy, your general health and fitness and any disability you may have. Your healthcare professional should advise you if needed. Try to reduce the amount of time you are sitting down and inactive, for example watching television or at a computer. And remember, it's worth being more active even if you don't manage to lose much weight, because it can improve your health in other ways. Even small changes can help.

Children should do 60 minutes of moderate activity each day. The NICE guidance says that good ways to encourage children to become more active include:

- reducing the amount of time they spend sitting down, for example watching the television, on a computer or playing video games
- giving them the chance to be more active generally, for example by walking, cycling, or playing active games
- helping them take part in regular activities that they enjoy, such as dancing, sports or swimming.

Do you need to go on a special diet?

Your healthcare professional will probably recommend that you reduce the amount of food you eat, as well as being more active.

Adults should usually be advised to follow a low-fat diet, or one where the food you eat each day provides about 600 kilocalories (kcal) less than your body needs to stay the same weight. The diet should fit with healthy eating advice. You should be offered advice and regular appointments with a healthcare professional to help you follow the diet.

Sometimes, the healthcare professional may recommend a low-calorie diet, where your food provides only 1000 to 1600 kcal a day.

If you have a BMI over 30 and have stopped losing weight before reaching your target, your healthcare professional may suggest an additional course of action:

- you follow a 'very-low-calorie' diet – this should not be for more than 12 weeks continuously, or
- you follow a very-low-calorie diet for 2 to 4 days a week.

On a very-low-calorie diet, your food provides less than 1000 kcal a day.

You should never follow a diet that provides less than 600 kcal a day unless this is being closely monitored by your doctor.

Advice on food for children

Your healthcare professional may recommend changes in what your child eats, but this should always be with other treatment or support, such as help with becoming more active. Any advice on food should fit in with general advice on healthy eating, and avoiding sweets and sugary drinks. Ideally, the whole family should make the same changes.

Making it easier to change your lifestyle

It can be difficult to make changes to your lifestyle to help you lose weight. Your healthcare professional will understand this, and will give you all the encouragement they can.

They should also be able to teach you techniques to help you change your lifestyle or arrange an appointment with a trained professional who can do this. The techniques might include:

- avoiding situations where you know you will be tempted to overeat
- eating more slowly
- being confident so that other people don't persuade you to give up your plans to eat healthily and become more active
- changing the way you think about food and being active
- ways to stop you putting weight back on and what to do if this happens.

If your child needs to lose weight they may be taught some of these techniques. They may also be asked to agree with their healthcare professional some realistic goals to do with eating a healthier diet or being more active. You can also help by setting your child a good example, and by giving lots of praise and encouragement.

Questions you might like to ask about lifestyle

- Can you give me some ideas for becoming more active?
- How can I help my whole family to eat more healthily?
- I am finding it very difficult to change what I eat. Is there anyone who can help me?
- Is there a leaflet I can have about being more active and improving my diet?
- Where can I get help to keep weight off once I have lost it?
- I have limited mobility. What can I do to increase my activity levels?
- How can I help an older person (or a child) lose weight?

Should you try a slimming club?

If you are an adult and are thinking about joining a slimming club or using a video or book, you should check that its advice is based on having a healthy balanced diet and being more active. People should not be expected to lose more than 0.5–1 kg (1–2 lb) a week. If the advice is different from this, it is unlikely to help you lose weight for good. Your GP surgery may be able to tell you about local groups that can help.

Are there medicines that can help you lose weight?

There are two medicines – called orlistat and sibutramine – that people can take to help them lose weight. They are not suitable for everyone, and can have side effects. Your doctor may suggest trying one of the medicines if you have been following advice on eating less and being more active for some time, but have still not lost enough weight.

The medicines are normally recommended only for people with a BMI over 30. But if you might be at risk of problems related to being overweight or obese – for example if you have diabetes or high cholesterol – your doctor may suggest trying medicine if your BMI is 27 or above.

You should have an opportunity to ask any questions you want about the possible benefits and side effects before you decide whether to go ahead with taking the medicine. And if you do decide to take it, you will have regular appointments with your doctor. You will also still need advice and support to help you continue with the changes to your lifestyle. If you don't manage to lose weight while taking the medicine, your doctor may advise you to stop taking it.

Once you have lost weight, your doctor should talk to you about whether to carry on taking the medicine to help you keep the weight off.

For children, only a specialist should prescribe medicine to help them lose weight, and even then this should only happen if their specialist considers that their weight is putting their health at serious risk. Children who are taking medicine to help them lose weight are looked after by a specialist team who give extra help with lifestyle changes and check how the child is getting on with the medicine.

Questions you might like to ask about medicine for obesity

- What are the pros and cons of taking medicine for obesity?
- How quickly will I start to lose weight?
- How long can I take the medicine for?
- Will the medicine help me keep off weight that I have lost?
- Will I put all the weight back on when I stop taking the medicine?
- When would medicine be suggested to help a child lose weight?

Will you need to see a specialist about losing weight?

Most people get all the help and treatment they need from their GP or other members of the team at the surgery. Your GP may refer you to a specialist if:

- you need tests to see if there is a medical condition causing your weight problems
- you have other medical conditions that need complex treatment
- an operation or other specialist treatment might help you.

If your child needs to lose weight, your GP may suggest they see a specialist for help with this if they have another medical condition, or special needs (for example, a learning disability).

Could an operation help you?

Sometimes an operation may be suggested. There are several different types of operation. They involve reducing the size of the stomach, so that the person eats less food, and may also bypass some of the gut, so that the body absorbs less of the food.

An operation is only recommended for people who:

- are seriously obese
- have tried all the other ways of losing weight without success
- have already been treated by a specialist obesity team.

These are major operations, and if your doctor thinks an operation may be suitable for you, you will need to talk in detail with the surgeon about the possible problems, as well as the benefits. The surgeon should be part of a specialist obesity surgery team, working with other healthcare professionals who will be involved in your care. You will need checks to make sure you don't have any medical conditions that could make the operation dangerous for you, and that you will be able to cope with the operation and recovering from it.

You will need to make changes to your eating habits to get the full benefits from the operation, and the team will need to be sure you can do this. You will also need to agree to regular appointments with the team afterwards.

For children, NICE says that an operation is not generally recommended. In very rare cases, an operation may be suggested for a young person who has been through puberty and is seriously obese. This will need to be done by a team with experience and special skills in treating young people, and the young person will need support before and after the operation.

Questions you might like to ask about having an operation for obesity

- Why are you suggesting an operation for me?
- What exactly does the operation involve and what are the risks?
- How quickly will I lose weight and will I put the weight back on again?
- What will I be able to eat after the operation?
- What support will be available to help me cope after the operation?
- Does my child really need an operation for their obesity?

More information about overweight and obesity

The organisations below can provide more information and support for people who are overweight or obese. Please note that NICE is not responsible for the quality or accuracy of any information or advice provided by these organisations.

- Weight Concern, www.weightconcern.org.uk
- The Obesity Awareness & Solutions Trust (TOAST), 0845 045 0225, www.toast-uk.org.uk
- British Obesity Surgery Patient Association (BOSPA), 01398 361 487, www.bospa.org

NHS Direct online (www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk) may also be a good starting point for finding out more about losing weight.

You could also look at these websites:

- the Food Standards Agency – www.foodstandards.gov.uk
- Government information on healthy eating – www.eatwell.gov.uk or www.5aday.nhs.uk
- Sport England – www.sportengland.org

Your local Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) may also be able to give you further information and support.

About NICE

NICE produces advice (guidance) for the NHS about preventing, diagnosing and treating different medical conditions. It also produces advice for local authorities and other public bodies, employers and the public on ways of preventing illness.

The guidance is written by independent experts including staff from the NHS, local authorities and other organisations, and people representing patients and carers. They consider the best available evidence on the condition and treatments, the views of patients and carers and the experiences of professionals working in the field. Staff working in the NHS and other public organisations are expected to follow this guidance.

To find out more about NICE, its work and how it reaches decisions, see www.nice.org.uk/aboutguidance

This booklet, a booklet called 'Preventing obesity and staying a healthy weight' and other versions of this guideline aimed at healthcare professionals, local authorities, schools and other organisations are available at www.nice.org.uk/CG043

You can order printed copies of this booklet from the NHS Response Line (phone 0870 1555 455 and quote reference N1155). For the booklet 'Preventing obesity and staying a healthy weight', quote reference N1153.

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ISBN 1-84629-321-9
N1155 10k 1P Dec 06