

Patient information from the BMJ Group

Obesity - drugs and surgery

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. If you are very obese and your health is at serious risk, your doctor may suggest you consider medicines or surgery to help you lose weight. These things are usually recommended only after you have tried to lose weight through eating a low-calorie diet and doing more exercise.

We've brought together the best and most up-to-date research about obesity to see what treatments work. You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are 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.

Most doctors use the body mass index (BMI) 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.

Being overweight can make you tired and breathless. You may struggle to do everyday things, like walking upstairs. Extra weight also puts pressure on your joints. You may find your knees hurt, or your back aches.

Being a healthy weight can reduce your chance of getting diabetes and other health problems, as well as some cancers.

What treatments work?

To lose weight, you need to take in fewer calories each day than you use. Medicines may help you lose weight. But you still need to follow a low-calorie diet and do exercise, otherwise they won't work. They also have side effects.

If your weight is putting your life in danger (for example, because you cannot breathe properly) you may need to lose weight quickly by having surgery. But this is only used as a last resort.

Medicines

There is one medicine used for weight loss in the UK. It is called orlistat (Xenical).

Your doctor will usually recommend medicines only if your BMI is 30 or more, or if your BMI is 27 or more and you have certain other medical problems.

Obesity - drugs and surgery

Orlistat doesn't stop you feeling hungry, but it stops your body absorbing some of the fat from the food you eat. About a third of the fat you eat passes straight out of your body in your stools.

Studies show that:

- People usually lose weight quite quickly when they take orlistat. But it doesn't work for everyone
- After taking orlistat for a year, most people lose about 8.1 kilograms (about 18 pounds). That's about 2.8 kilograms (6 pounds) more than people who take a dummy treatment (a placebo).

Most people taking orlistat get some of these side effects: an oily leakage from their bowels, diarrhoea which comes on very quickly, frequent wind, and nausea and vomiting. You can avoid them by making sure that your meals contain no more than 30 percent fat. Talk to your doctor or a dietitian about how to do this.

Orlistat can also stop you from absorbing vitamin D, vitamin E, vitamin K and beta-carotene (vitamin A). Your doctor may recommend vitamin supplements.

You may have read about 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 may interfere with medicines you are taking for other conditions.

Weight loss (bariatric) surgery

If you're very obese, surgery to make your stomach smaller can help you eat less and lose weight. This is called weight loss, or bariatric, surgery. Weight loss surgery is a major operation. It's only done if your weight is very high and dangerous to your health, and if you've tried other ways of losing weight. You need to follow a strict diet after the operation.

Weight loss surgery works because you feel full after eating only a few grams of food.

The main operations are:

- **Gastric bypass:** The surgeon staples a small pouch in the top of your stomach. The rest of the stomach is closed off.
- **Gastroplasty:** This is similar to a bypass, but the pouch isn't totally closed off.
- **Gastric banding:** An adjustable band makes a small pouch in the top part of your stomach.
- **Biliopancreatic diversion:** The bottom part of your stomach is removed so your stomach is smaller

Obesity - drugs and surgery

- **Sleeve gastrectomy:** This operation closes off three-quarters of the stomach, leaving a narrow tube.

People in studies lost about 28 kilograms (62 pounds) in the year after having surgery. Most people who have weight loss surgery manage to keep off around 19 kilograms (42 pounds) for at least 10 years.

The amount of weight you lose depends on what you eat and how much exercise you do after surgery. Surgery doesn't work for everyone. Some people don't lose any weight, or put most of it back on.

Up to 1 in 8 people get problems after weight loss surgery. Being treated by an experienced surgeon, and in a hospital where surgeons do lots of operations for obesity, reduces the risk of getting problems. All the types of surgery seem to have about the same risk.

There's a small chance that you will die during surgery or shortly afterwards. In studies, between 1 and 2 out of 500 people died during or a few weeks after surgery. About 1 in 50 people who have weight loss surgery need a second operation because of problems after their first operation.

These are other risks:

- About 7 in 100 people get something called an abscess. This is a collection of pus in the stomach, caused by an infection
- About 4 in 100 people get an infection in the lungs (pneumonia) or a collapsed lung
- About 4 in 100 people get an infection in the wound where the operation is done.

To reduce your risk of complications you may need to lose some weight before surgery. It's also best to give up smoking at least six weeks before surgery.

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. Medicines or surgery can help some people.

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 health care, 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, available on the website at <http://guidance.nice.org.uk/CG43/publicinfo/pdf/English>.

Obesity - drugs and surgery

This information is aimed at a UK patient audience. This information however does not replace medical advice. If you have a medical problem please see your doctor. Please see our full [Conditions of Use](#) for this content.

BMJ^{Group}