

Overweight and obesity

The Health Column

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Overweight and obesity is a National Health Priority Area, currently affecting almost 63% of Australian adults and 25% of Australian children. The latest statistics show 37% men and women aged 25–50 years are overweight, and 27% are obese. It has been predicted that by 2025, based on current figures, nearly 80% of Australians will be overweight or obese.

The causes of overweight and obesity are not easy to define. Although diet and physical activity are central to maintaining a healthy weight, social, environmental, behavioural, genetic and physiological factors all play their part in contributing to weight gain. For many, weight gain is hard to avoid and very difficult to reverse.



The World Health Organization (WHO) defines overweight and obesity as abnormal or excessive fat accumulation (build-up) that may impair health. We gain weight when we eat more energy (kilojoules) than we use up through exercise or activity. Energy is measured in kilojoules (kJ) and different foods provide different amounts of energy.

Gaining weight can increase your risk of health problems, like type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease. People with most of their body fat around their waist, which surrounds our vital organs, are at an increased risk. Risk factors for weight gain include living in inner regional, outer regional and remote areas of Australia, and living in a lower socioeconomic area.

Australia's Healthy Weight Week (AHWW) is an initiative of the Dietitians Association of Australia, raising awareness of the importance of achieving and maintaining a healthy weight and lifestyle. This year, AHWW runs from 16–22 February 2015, with the theme of 'Get inspired to achieve a healthier weight and lifestyle'. Events are held in February each year to help promote this message and encourage people to see an accredited practising dietitian to assist with food, nutrition and lifestyle management. More information is available at: www.healthyweightweek.com.au.

However, only one in 10 Australians who are trying to lose weight seek advice from a dietitian. Other allied health professionals such as doctors and pharmacists can also provide advice and materials to help people want to lose weight or manage their weight. Weight management is an important part of pharmacy practice, and measuring body mass index (BMI) and waist circumference (WC) is a way of identifying if a person is overweight or obese and may benefit from advice about weight management.

People also often have unrealistic expectations of how much weight loss is possible. Weight loss goals should be realistic (e.g. 1–2 kg per month), and even small amounts of weight loss improve health and wellbeing. Weight management must focus on health improvement and behavioural change rather than only on weight loss.

Weight management is a long-term strategy. It must be initiated by the individual and then maintained with the help of healthcare professionals, family, friends and carers. It involves setting realistic goals, self-monitoring behaviour and progress, understanding stimulus control (recognising and avoiding triggers that prompt unplanned eating), modifying thinking and problem solving.

Lifestyle interventions are the first approach in weight management, with an aim to reduce energy intake, increase physical activity and encourage behavioural change. Interventions that manage all three of these areas have been shown to be more effective than those that address only one or two. More intensive interventions of very low-energy diets (e.g. meal replacement products), weight loss medicines and even surgery may be required if no weight loss or reduction in waist circumference is seen after three months.

Weight loss medicines and products should be used with a healthy diet and increased physical activity for consumers who are overweight and obese in order to highlight the need for a healthy diet, regular physical activity and lifestyle change to achieve and maintain a healthy weight. Your local pharmacy is your health destination, with many offering weight management products and services. During AHWW visit your local pharmacy and talk to them about weight loss.

You can get more information on obesity from pharmacies around Australia providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information. Self Care Fact Cards available from these pharmacies include topics such as *Weight and health*, *Fat and cholesterol*, and *Fibre and bowel health*.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au 'Supporting practice' then 'Self Care', and then 'Find a Self Care pharmacy'.