

It's not news that being overweight is bad for your health, but only in the last few years has research shown precisely how unhealthy it is. Compared to people of normal weight, those who are overweight have a 60% greater risk of dying within 10 years from all causes. For people with obesity (a BMI of 30 or higher), the risk of dying is more than twice as great as it is for people whose weight is normal. The biggest increase in risk is for death from heart disease, which is more than three times greater for overweight people and up to six times greater for people with obesity.

While being overweight or obese increases anyone's risk for health problems, the danger is greater for some people than for others. For example, white people face a significantly higher risk for illness and death from excess weight than do blacks. And among blacks, the risk for illness and death from obesity is greater among men than women. Indeed, among black women, being overweight (as opposed to obese) doesn't seem to add substantially to risk for disease or death. The reasons for these differences are unclear. Perhaps some groups of people — such as black women — have a genetic predisposition toward good health at a higher weight. But even people who are predisposed to health at higher weights will face a greater risk for illness and death if they are obese.

The Weighty 30+

Excess weight causes or exacerbates more than 30 illnesses, which fall into five broad categories: metabolic, degenerative, anatomic, cancer (neoplastic complications), and psychological. Some obesity-related conditions fall under more than one of these categories.

Metabolic Complications

These are illnesses caused by abnormalities in the body's chemistry and functions. They include, among others, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, high triglycerides, gallstones, and fatty liver disease.

Of all the metabolic complications from overweight, the greatest risk is for type 2 diabetes, a chronic disease in which the body's ability to use sugar is impaired. Excess body fat contributes to the development of resistance to the effects of insulin, a hormone that is critical in regulating the body's ability to metabolize sugar and other nutrients normally.

Overweight people are more than 15 times more likely than are those of normal weight to have type 2 diabetes. And, depending on BMI, those with obesity are 20–50 times more likely than normal-weight people to develop the condition.

Overweight is also linked to gallbladder disease. In a study published in 1999, the prevalence of gallbladder disease was about 2% among men and 6% among women of normal weight. For those who were

ILLNESSES ASSOCIATED WITH OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY	
Metabolic Complications	Anatomic Complications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Type 2 diabetes • High cholesterol • High triglycerides • Hypertension • Gallstones • Fatty liver disease • Gout • Central sleep apnea • Pseudotumor cerebri 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obstructive sleep apnea • Gastroesophageal reflux • Reflux-associated asthma • Hernias • Edema • Venous insufficiency • Ventral hernia • Blood clots in legs and lungs • Urinary incontinence • Fungal infections of the skin • Bacterial infections of the skin (cellulitis) • Peripheral vascular disease • Skin ulcers
Degenerative Complications	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arthritis • Heart attack or angina • Stroke • Peripheral vascular disease • Complications of diabetes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • nerve damage • eye disease • kidney disease • vascular disease 	
Psychological Complications	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depression • Anxiety • Binge eating • Bulimia 	
	Cancers (Neoplastic Complications)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Endometrial • Breast • Ovarian • Prostate • Colon • Esophageal adenocarcinoma

overweight, the prevalence rose to 3% of men and 12% of women, and — among those with obesity — as high as 10% of men and 23% of women.

Degenerative Complications

These illnesses result from a permanent deterioration of part of the body. Degenerative changes can result indirectly from one or more of the metabolic complications listed above. For example, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and high triglycerides are major risk factors for heart disease and stroke. But degenerative complications can also occur from gravity — the mechanical pressure of the body's excess weight bearing down on certain structures. For example, obesity can cause arthritis and deterioration of the knee and hip joints, as well as injury to the spinal discs. Damage to other parts of the body, such as the heart and lungs, is partly related to the added strain from the excess weight.

Anatomic Complications

These are conditions caused by weight-related structural changes in the bones, muscles, or skin. A common anatomic complication from obesity is obstructive sleep apnea, in which breathing stops for up to 10 seconds during sleep. These episodes may recur 100 times or more every night. The increased fat around the neck can cause the airways to become temporarily blocked during sleep. Losing weight helps reduce the blockage and the incidence of sleep apnea. Obesity can also cause acid reflux, the regurgitation of stomach acid into the esophagus, which leads to heartburn. Excess abdominal fat promotes reflux by increasing pressure on the muscular valve at the bottom of the esophagus that normally keeps stomach acid from backing up. Some people with esophageal reflux develop asthma because stomach acids build up in the throat and drip into the lungs.

Overweight people may also develop skin infections in areas where folds of skin rub against each other, often on the chest, lower abdomen, and upper thighs. The most common are bacterial infections (cellulitis and folliculitis) and fungal infections which can occur inside the skin folds, despite careful hygiene. These infections need to be treated with antibiotics or antifungal medications.

Cancer

Being overweight or obese is a risk factor for six forms of cancer: breast, ovarian, endometrial, colorectal, esophageal, and prostate. The risk for death by cancer is 80% higher among overweight people — and more than twice as high among those who are obese — as it is among individuals of normal weight.

Even modest weight loss of 5% to 10% of your starting weight can lead to significant health benefits.

Psychological Complications

Depression and anxiety are extremely common complications of overweight and obesity. These psychological disorders occur partly in response to the pervasive bias against overweight and obese people. These complications also result from the frustration that many people feel when they fail to lose weight or when they regain all of the weight they had lost. Other psychological complications of obesity include binge eating disorder and, less commonly, bulimia (purposeful bingeing and purging).

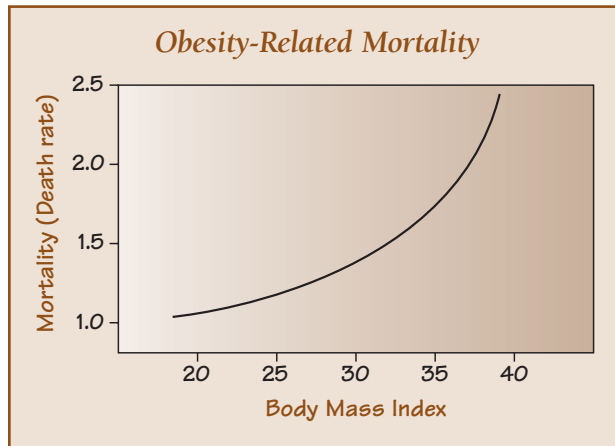
Depression or anxiety often causes weight gain in people who tend to overeat in response to stress, leading to a vicious cycle of weight gain, which causes further stress and depression, which leads to further weight gain, and so on.

Health Benefits of Weight Loss

Losing excess weight is beneficial for two reasons: Not only can it make you feel better, it also lowers your risk for illness and can help you live a longer, healthier life. Weight loss helps health conditions that often go hand in hand with obesity, including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, esophageal reflux, arthritis, fatty liver disease, sleep apnea, and depression. It also raises levels of beneficial high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol, the so-called “good” cholesterol. Especially encouraging is that you don't have to lose a tremendous amount of weight to become healthier.

Even modest weight loss of 5%–10% of your starting weight can lead to significant health benefits. In one study, people with hypertension who lost a modest 10 pounds over six months reduced their systolic blood pressure by 2.8 millimeters of mercury (mm Hg) and their diastolic blood pressure by 2.5 mm Hg. These reductions in blood pressure were equivalent to the reductions brought about by treatment with blood pressure medications. Weight loss is

so effective that many people with high blood pressure can stop taking blood pressure medicine after they lose weight.



Researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conducted two 12-year studies of overweight adults — one of men, the other of women — to find out whether intentional weight loss is associated with a decrease in mortality. The study of 43,457 women, published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* in 1995, found that *any* amount of intentional weight loss was beneficial. The authors reported a 20% reduction in premature deaths among women with obesity-related medical disorders who intentionally lost some weight. In this group, the most dramatic effects were a 40%–50% decrease in deaths from obesity-related cancers and a 30%–40% decline in death from type 2 diabetes. The study of 49,337 men, published in the same journal in 1999, found a 32%–36% decline in death from diabetes among men with health problems who intentionally lost weight. ■