

How to Talk to Your Patients about Their Weight



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If you find it difficult talking to patients about their weight, you're not alone. Whether it's because of time constraints, discomfort with broaching the topic, or a lack of confidence on how to advise patients once the topic of weight is introduced, many doctors steer clear of the subject entirely.

As America's obesity epidemic worsens, it's more critical than ever for doctors to overcome this hesitance. Here are some tips to help you tackle this important topic with patients in a way that's sensitive and helpful:

ASK PERMISSION. Doctors are often afraid of offending patients by bringing up the subject, but if you ask permission patients may be more open to the discussion. Ask if they'd mind if you take a few minutes to talk about their weight and how it affects their health.

USE THE RIGHT WORDS. Patients don't like clinical and unpleasant-sounding terms like "obesity" and "morbid obesity." Instead, talk about weight in nonjudgmental language they can understand; for example, refer to "weight" or "excess weight" instead.

LINK WEIGHT TO OTHER HEALTH CONCERNS. Let patients know that getting their weight under control is an important step toward helping to address other medical problems they may have, such as diabetes and hypertension.

PROVIDE ACTION STEPS. While "you need to eat less and exercise more" may be a true statement, it's the last thing patients want to hear. They need practical, achievable, manageable and measurable goals to pursue. Refer patients to a specific diet program or diet Web site and provide them with a fitness resource like your hospital's wellness center or a local gym.

KNOW YOUR PATIENT. The action steps you provide should be based on the patient's lifestyle. For some patients, a daily walk around the block is a tremendous step forward. Others may be ready for a complete workout program with aerobic, strength training and flexibility components.

ADDRESS THEIR DIETARY HABITS. Your patients should leave your office with a few things they can change in their diet that are tailored to their eating patterns. If a patient eats large portions for instance, give tips about slowing down when eating, filling up on lower-calorie foods and downsizing instead of upsizing. For patients who skip meals, stress the importance of eating balanced meals throughout the day.

MAKE CHANGES CONVENIENT AND UNINTIMIDATING. Remind patients that an extra 50 calories a day can lead to a five-pound weight gain over a year. Let them know that small changes make a big difference. And provide advice that will help them make changes with minimal disruption to their lives.

GIVE THEM OPTIONS. Instead of just encouraging patients to walk more, consider giving them a coupon for a complimentary workout at a local gym so they can explore options without commitment. To have an impact, you need to provide advice so the patient leaves your office thinking, "Yeah, I can do that."