

Understanding Obesity and Weight Loss: From Science to Treatment Options

Obesity is a prevalent, complex, progressive and relapsing chronic disease, characterized by abnormal or excessive body fat (adiposity), that impairs health. South African statistics show that 50% of women and almost half of men are living with obesity. In addition, 21% of under 5-year-olds and 1 in 4 adolescents are being diagnosed with obesity.

Obesity is regarded as a disease because it is caused by abnormalities in the appetite centre of the brain, it has typical signs and symptoms and leads to significant morbidity and mortality. The fundamental cause of obesity is an energy imbalance: energy intake exceeds energy expenditure over a prolonged period. However, the mechanisms driving this imbalance are multifaceted and involve a complex interplay of genetic, environmental, behavioural, and hormonal factors. Obesity causes complications such as disruptions of metabolic functions, physical effects and mental illness.

Accurate, timely and empathetic diagnosis helps the person living with obesity to access holistic health care. This includes appropriate dietary changes, most importantly is calorie reduction. Unfortunately, weight loss will always trigger a biological response to protect the metabolic setpoint. This is the reason almost all weight-loss programs fail – not because the PLWO becomes lazy or weak willed. Medical intervention in the form of pharmacotherapy or metabolic surgery has changed our ability to effectively treat obesity.

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