

THE OBESITY SOLUTION: More Than Meets The Eye

Factors that contribute to obesity and need to be addressed for long-term weight loss success

by Dr. Kendall Guyer Ritz, MD

Obesity is a growing problem among Americans of all ages. While we always knew carrying extra weight was unhealthy, it used to be viewed as more of an aesthetic problem – people wanted to look good. However, as the number of overweight people reaches epidemic proportions, we are now discovering the true severity of our situation. Obesity's link to many disease processes – diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and cancer to name only a few – is particularly menacing. Consider the following: obesity is the leading preventable cause of death, severe obesity at age 50 puts you in the same risk category as having breast or prostate cancer, and today's children are the first generation who may have a shorter lifespan than their parents.

Despite this reality, weight loss remains elusive to the majority of people who need it most. While the seemingly obvious answer is so simple, eat right and exercise, most people will eventually fail in their attempt to lose weight. Even those who are successful have difficulty maintaining that success long-term. This failure leads to desperation. It is this widespread desperation that has fueled the explosion in fad diets as well as a turn toward more extreme weight loss measures, including gastric bypass surgery. While a healthy diet and the right exercise are certainly the foundation for successful weight loss, there is more to the equation – additional factors that contribute to obesity and therefore need to be addressed for long-term weight loss success.

First and foremost, it is critical to make an emotional connection to weight loss success. Eating and emotion are inextricably linked as are the reasons we become and remain overweight. Answering questions such as why you are overweight and why you want to lose weight in a deeply thoughtful, reflective way can get you in touch with the emotional aspects contributing to excess weight. Once you make this connection, losing weight successfully becomes much more compelling which, in turn, encourages continued motivation.

Two big players that are often overlooked as part of a successful program are sleep hygiene and stress management. Sleep deprivation is a well-documented contributor to weight gain and needs to be actively addressed. A reasonable goal would be 8 hours of sleep per night with the same bedtime and wake time being ideal. Thirty to sixty minutes prior to bedtime, actively wind down- reading, taking a warm bath, sipping herbal tea – really anything to slow the mind and prepare it for a good night's sleep.

Stress management is key not only for weight loss success but for overall wellness as stress contributes to a litany of other health problems. Meditation is an excellent stress reducer and can be accomplished in just minutes a day. Relaxing forms of movement such as qigong, tai chi, or yoga can be just as effective. Biofeedback, a technique in which patients learn to control bodily functions such as heart rate, respiratory rate, and blood pressure, can be extremely effective for managing chronic stress as well.

In terms of eating, obesity is associated with excess. But while obese individuals are overfed, they are often undernourished. As shocking as it may seem, our reliance on processed convenience foods has rendered many Americans deficient in basic, vital nutrients such as magnesium, vitamin D, and essential fats. Such deficiencies contribute to hypertension, depression, and cancer and can make losing weight difficult. Nutritional status needs to be optimized for weight loss to occur in a healthy, sustainable way. Patterns of eating need to be adjusted as well. One of the single most effective things you can do to lose weight is stop eating at least 2 hours prior to bedtime on a daily basis.

Other factors that contribute to excess weight include hormonal imbalance and toxic burden, which are often related. For example, thyroid health is critical for weight management and, in turn, environmental toxins in our food, water, and air can compromise thyroid function.

With all of these factors contributing to obesity, the solution clearly goes beyond diet and exercise alone. Weight loss needs to be viewed in a more holistic sense – that is, all areas of imbalance must be addressed and corrected – and as this occurs weight loss is the natural result. In addition, this approach will lead to optimal overall health. Since being at a “healthy” weight does not guarantee health, a weight loss approach that encourages health and vitality is key. Looking fabulous will be a welcome added bonus.

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