



Be Involved in Your Health Care



Along your weight-loss journey, you and your health care team may need to treat a health problem related to your weight. This health problem may result from prior weight gain and, once present, may make it harder to lose weight. And sometimes, medications used to treat health problems can also make it harder to lose weight.

It's important to talk to your health care team about all aspects of your care, including your weight-loss goals. Together, you may decide to change parts of your treatment program, including the treatment of your related health problems.

For example, many medical problems will improve with weight loss. You and your team may decide to hold off on starting or adding a new medication or undergoing a procedure in hopes that your condition will improve as you lose weight. Likewise, if you are taking a medication that can cause weight gain, your doctor may be able to prescribe a different medication that does not have that unwanted effect.

Medical Problems Associated with Weight Gain

Several medical problems are common in people who are overweight.

Diabetes and Prediabetes

Diabetes is a chronic (long-term) condition. When you have diabetes, the sugar level in your blood is too high. Diabetes keeps your body from turning food into energy. That's why you may feel tired and rundown, especially after eating. You may also be more likely to develop other health problems. These include foot, eye, heart, and kidney problem.

Being overweight raises the risk for Type 2 diabetes. With this form of diabetes, your body's cells have trouble using insulin. This "insulin resistance" not only raises your blood sugar levels, it can cause further damage to your body. Over time, the pancreas may lose its ability to produce enough insulin, raising your blood sugar levels even higher.

If you have prediabetes, your blood sugar is higher than normal, but not so high to be considered diabetes. About one in four people with prediabetes will develop Type 2 diabetes within 3 years of being diagnosed with prediabetes.

Losing weight through healthy eating and increased physical activity can improve the body's response to insulin and control of blood sugar levels. In turn, this can reduce the risk of moving from prediabetes to diabetes. These healthy lifestyle changes can also help people with diabetes to manage their blood sugar better.

High Blood Pressure

Sometimes called hypertension, high blood pressure is common in people who are overweight. Over time, high blood pressure can damage the arteries, heart, and kidneys and can lead to heart disease and stroke. Treatment options include eating a healthy diet, increasing physical activity, and blood pressure-lowering medications.



High Cholesterol

High cholesterol is often linked to eating a diet that is too high in cholesterol and saturated fat or having an inherited condition that causes elevated cholesterol levels. High cholesterol increases your risk of developing heart disease and stroke. Treatment options include eating a healthy diet, increasing physical activity, and possibly taking cholesterol-lowering medicines.

Heartburn/Acid Reflux

Being overweight, especially in the stomach and waist, can cause acid reflux—when stomach acid washes up and irritates your throat and chest. This condition is often called heartburn. Acid reflux can also cause coughing, sore throat, a bitter taste in the mouth or back of the throat, and burning and pressure in the chest. Acid reflux that occurs frequently or over a long time can also cause damage to the esophagus (the tube between the throat and stomach), tooth enamel, bad breath, trouble swallowing, and asthma. Losing weight can help relieve acid reflux and its symptoms, as can cutting back on alcohol or smoking.

Arthritis

While being overweight doesn't directly cause arthritis, it can make arthritis worse. Extra weight puts more stress on certain joints, such as your knees. This stress can cause the joints to become inflamed or wear out sooner. The resulting joint pain may make you less active, which can lead to even more weight gain. This becomes a vicious cycle—losing weight can help break this cycle.

Sleep Apnea

In some people, especially those who are overweight, structures in the throat can partially block their air passage during sleep. This narrows the passage and makes it hard to breathe and sleep restfully. Sometimes, the entire air passage can become blocked. This is called sleep apnea. Since the lungs aren't getting enough air, the brain tells the body to wake up just enough to tighten the muscles and unblock the air passage. With a loud gasp, breathing begins again. This process may repeat throughout the night.

Several treatments exist for sleep apnea. Losing weight can help improve the condition. Other treatments include wearing a mouthpiece, using a continuous positive air pressure (or CPAP) machine, and surgery. If untreated, sleep apnea can cause fatigue, high blood pressure, and lung and heart disease.



Non-Alcoholic Fatty Liver

Fatty liver is when fat stores increase in the liver. The liver can be damaged and can enlarge. Many people feel fine and have no symptoms but some develop serious liver damage that can lead to liver failure. Also, heart disease, stroke, and diabetes are more common in people with fatty liver.

Fatty liver often occurs in people with high blood sugar, obesity, or high cholesterol. Losing weight helps decrease the amount of fat depositing in the liver and can slow down the process of damaging the liver cells.

Heart Disease

Being overweight can increase the workload of the heart and contribute to heart and circulation issues such as heart attacks, heart failure, and blood clots.

Cancer

Overweight and obesity have been associated with an increased risk of developing at least 10 different cancers.

Medications and Weight

Unfortunately, some common treatments for these and other conditions can cause weight gain or make it harder for you to lose weight.

Condition	Medications
Diabetes	Weight gain is a common side effect for people who take insulin or other commonly used diabetes medications. However, other diabetes medications are available that may promote weight loss and help you reduce or even eliminate your insulin dosage.
High Blood Pressure	Several medicines used to treat high blood pressure may contribute to weight gain and fatigue; others are less likely to promote weight gain. Losing as little as 10 pounds can lower your blood pressure and may reduce the amount of medication you needed to keep your blood pressure controlled.
High Cholesterol	Some medicines used to treat high cholesterol can promote insulin resistance and raise your blood sugar levels. However, losing weight can reduce the doses needed to control your cholesterol.
Arthritis	Some treatments that relieve the pain from arthritis, such as steroid pills or injections, can cause weight gain and raise blood sugars.
Mental Health	Some anti-psychotic medications prescribed for bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and posttraumatic stress disorder can cause weight gain. Some antidepressant medications can also cause weight gain.
Hormonal	Some hormone replacement therapies, steroids, and birth control medication can lead to weight gain and make it more difficult for you to lose weight.
Pain	Some over-the-counter medications, like naproxen sodium, contain high levels of sodium, causing you to hold water.

There may be alternatives for these medications. Talk to your health care team if you think your medicines may be contributing to weight gain. Never stop taking a medicine without first talking to your health care team, but do let them know about your concerns.

Be Involved in Your Health Care

We strongly encourage you to play an active role when you visit with your health care team. To get the most out of your visit, plan the questions you want to ask and the things you want to discuss. Share any concerns you may have about your care, especially if you think it may be affecting your weight-loss goals. Finally, be sure to leave the visit with information about your conditions, treatments, and what you can do to manage your conditions.

Here are some ways to be more involved in your health care and get the most out of your next visit.

Before your visit:

- Write down your health questions and concerns.
- Bring a list of all the medications you take, including vitamins and supplements.
- Get more information at www.veteranshealthlibrary.org and www.myhealth.va.gov, especially about medications you take that can promote weight gain.

During your visit:

- Bring a family member, friend or caregiver to help you remember what you and your team discuss.
- Share your questions, problems, and concerns with your team at the beginning of your visit.
- Tell your team about your past illnesses/hospitalizations, medications, and any problems you may be experiencing.
- Tell your team about your goals - what matters most to you about your health - as well as your needs and preferences for treatment.
- Work with your team to create a treatment plan that addresses your needs, and ask to be involved in making decisions about your care.
- Know your medications and why you take them, and ask for written instructions and information to take home with you.
- Ask your team to clarify anything that's confusing, and speak up if you have concerns or think something is wrong.
- Ask when and how you will get test results and additional treatments.

After your visit:

- Revisit the Veterans Health Library and My HealthVet.
- Tell your team if you have problems following your care plan, or if there is a change in your conditions or health.
- Consider ways you can stick to your plan, such as by using medication reminder systems and tracking logs, or by letting others know about your goals and plans.
- Be sure to keep track of and celebrate progress toward your goals!