

Doctors decide: Being very overweight should be seen as a disease

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.21.13

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De' Ahja Johnson, 10, right, checks the scale during her weekly weigh-in with Sarah Sabay, executive director of the Austin Foundation, which promotes fitness in Seattle's Central District, in Washington. Photo: Tom Reese/Seattle Times

WASHINGTON — The United States has a weight problem. Over one-third of adults are more than just overweight, they are obese. So are more than one-tenth of children. On Tuesday, U.S. doctors voted to call obesity a disease.

The vote affects 78 million American adults and 12 million children. They will now be seen as patients in need of medical treatment.

The American Medical Association is the country's top group of doctors. The AMA took the vote after discussing all the pros and cons. They questioned whether the action would do more harm than good. Would it help obese patients get useful treatment? Or would it cause them shame?

The AMA's own experts had worried about the cons. But in the end, AMA decided to give [obesity \(https://www.newsela.com/?tag=obesity\)](https://www.newsela.com/?tag=obesity) the disease label.

Dr. Patrice Harris is a leader in the AMA. He said labeling obesity as a disease will help. It could change the way the doctors tackle the problem.

Diagnose, Discuss And Treat

The AMA's decision means doctors will have a duty to talk about weight. They will have to tell their patients who are very overweight that they are obese. They will also need to recommend treatment.

Doctors can be uncomfortable talking about weight with their patients. More than half of obese patients have never been told by a doctor they need to lose weight. Doctors avoid having the talk. It's not just because they don't want to hurt the patient's feelings. They may also be unwilling to talk about it because insurance companies don't pay doctors for such talks.

The vote may help them get over that discomfort.

The AMA used to call obesity a condition, a concern and a disorder. The new disease label is more serious.

Dr. Rexford Ahima works at the University of Pennsylvania. Doctors "tend to look at obesity as a behavior problem," Ahima said. "This will force (doctors) to address it, even if we don't have a cure for it."

Rising Health Problems

Americans have been gaining weight at a fast pace for 30 years. All those extra pounds have caused a lot of health problems. Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease are just two of them. Treatment for weight-related diseases costs the U.S. \$150 billion a year. The cost could go up \$550 billion over the next 20 years.

The AMA argued that changing the label could bring new treatments. The government has allowed just two new weight-loss medications since 1999. The government might now approve new obesity drugs, the AMA noted.

Calling obesity a disease also might help prevention. More gym classes and better school lunches were two solutions the AMA mentioned. The vote may give support to overweight workers. Companies might start to pay for treatments. It may also stop job discrimination against obese workers, the AMA said.

But the AMA also said that making obesity a disease has risks. It could put more unwanted attention on obese people. Some patients could be doomed to endless nagging. Even those who had lost enough weight to improve their health could get targeted.

Exercise And Healthy Diet

It might also shift focus toward drugs and operations instead of other treatment. The AMA still wants people to exercise and follow healthy diets.

Dr. Daniel H. Bessesen is an obesity expert at the University of Colorado. He said the label has a good and bad side. Changing the label shows there's "a growing awareness that obesity is not someone's fault."

Still, he worried that the word disease may make people feel ashamed. People who are obese don't need to feel any more shame, he added.

Quiz

- 1 Select the paragraph from the article that states the main reason doctors do not talk to their patients about being overweight.

- 2 The AMA has called obesity all of the following EXCEPT
 - (A) a concern
 - (B) a disorder
 - (C) a condition
 - (D) a behavior problem

- 3 How might labeling obesity as a disease change schools?
 - (A) Children will have to attend gym class every day of the week.
 - (B) Schools will offer more gym classes and healthier lunches.
 - (C) Children will no longer be able to bring sweets to school.
 - (D) Schools will serve only salads and fresh fruit for lunch.

- 4 Labeling obesity as a disease has all the following risks EXCEPT
 - (A) Make overweight people feel bad.
 - (B) Make people treat obese people badly.
 - (C) Make people want to eat more junk food.
 - (D) Make people want to take drugs to lose weight.

Answer Key

- 1 Select the paragraph from the article that states the main reason doctors do not talk to their patients about being overweight.

Paragraph 6:

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