

Tips for Talking to Patients About Weight Management

Make the most of the patient visit and set an effective tone for communication.

- Use preferred terms such as weight, excess weight and BMI when describing obesity.
- Ask the patient if he/she is comfortable discussing general health including weight.
“What types of changes would you like to see in your health right now?”
“Could we talk about your weight?”
- Address your patient’s chief complaint first, independent of weight. Give the patient a few minutes to discuss other issues that are of concern to them. Patients don’t want blame of all their health problems related to their weight.
- Ask about weight history and how excess weight has affected his/her life.
- Be careful to communicate a nonjudgmental attitude that distinguishes between the weight problem and the patient with the problem.
“I’m concerned about your weight because I think it is causing health problems for you.”
“What do you think about your weight?”
- Express your concerns about the health risks associated with excess weight (why change?) and how this is affecting the patient. Review patient’s BMI, waist circumference and health risks.

Assess the patient’s readiness to lose weight.

- Ask if he/she would consider lifestyle changes to lose weight and improve health.
“What changes would you be willing to make in eating and physical activity habits right now?” *“Are you interested in improving the way you eat?”*
- Ask about previous attempts to lose weight. What were the most successful and least successful?
- Ask about physical activity and attitude toward exercise.
“What types of things do you like to do or enjoy doing?”
“Would you be open to exploring ways to be more active every day?”
- Ask about level of support from family and friends he or she can expect.
“How do you feel about your outlook on your life, your family, your work?”
- Ask about potential barriers to success.
“What kinds of things may stop you from improving your overall health between now and your next visit?”

Build a partnership and help set realistic goals.

- Discuss the collaborative effort needed for setting goals.
“What kind of help would you like from me regarding your weight?”
“What are your goals concerning your weight?” *“What do you want out of this?”*
- Explain that even a small weight loss of 10 percent of initial weight can lower health risks.
- Select and discuss two or three measurable, action steps needed to achieve the patient’s weight management goals. Give advice they can use in their life situation regarding diet and exercise (break behaviors into smaller pieces).
- Provide and discuss patient handouts and/or refer patient to a dietitian who specializes in weight control, exercise specialist, or weight loss program.
- Direct patients to online resources about weight, health eating and physical activity.
- Follow-up. If your patient has made progress on healthy behavior changes, offer praise to boost motivation and self-esteem. Discuss setbacks with patients and help them overcome challenges.
“You seem healthier today since our last visit. Have you been doing anything differently?”

Sources: “Talking to Patients about Weight Loss: Tips for Primary Care Professionals.” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; NIH Publication No. 05-5634. October 2005.
“Three Steps to Initiate Discussion About Weight Loss Management with your Patients.” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; NIH Publication No. 02-5211. November 2002.