

# AMA calls obesity a disease in a move that affects millions of Americans

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.21.13

Word Count **816**



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 —Almost 36 percent of adults and 12 percent of children in the United States are obese, or greatly overweight. On Tuesday, the top U.S. medical organization voted to label obesity as a disease.

The move affects 78 million American adults and 12 million children. They will now be seen as patients having a medical condition that requires treatment.

The American Medical Association is the nation's leading group of doctors. The AMA took the vote after much debate. They argued whether the action would do more to help overweight patients get treatment, or would add more shame to the complex condition.

The AMA's own experts had cautioned against the move. But in the end, AMA decided to extend the new disease status.

## **Pressure On Health Insurers**

Dr. Patrice Harris is an AMA board member. He said labeling [obesity \(https://www.newsela.com/?tag=obesity\)](https://www.newsela.com/?tag=obesity) as a disease will help change the way the doctors tackle the issue.

Tuesday's vote will put pressure on health insurance companies. There is demand for insurers to reimburse physicians for the time-consuming task of discussing obesity's health risks with patients. It should make doctors more likely to recommend weight-loss programs and monitor their patients' progress.

Anyone with a body mass index greater than 30 is considered obese. The body mass index is a measurement of body fat based on weight and height. A person 5 feet 4 inches tall weighing 175 pounds has a BMI of 30. For a person 6 feet tall, a weight of 221 pounds equals a BMI of 30.

Medicare already covers the costs of some behavioral treatments for obese patients. It also pays for surgery for those with additional health conditions. Medicare is a government-sponsored program. It insures an estimated 13 million obese Americans who are over 65 or disabled. But not all private insurers cover such obesity treatments.

Insurers in the California Association of Health Plans cover many services to treat symptoms of obesity, said chief executive Patrick Johnston. Those services include bariatric surgery, an operation to reduce the size of the stomach.

## **Making Doctors Diagnose And Discuss**

The AMA's decision means physicians now have an obligation to diagnose obesity and recommend treatment. As such, it should encourage primary care physicians to talk about weight with their patients. Studies have found that more than half of obese patients have never been told by a doctor that they need to lose weight.

Doctors are reluctant to have the conversation. Not only do they not want to offend their patients, but they may also be unwilling to start a long discussion for which they won't be paid. Past AMA documents have called obesity an "urgent chronic condition," a "major health concern" and a "complex disorder." The vote now lifts obesity above the status of a health condition or disorder.

"Primary care physicians tend to look at obesity as a behavior problem," said Dr. Rexford Ahima of the University of Pennsylvania. "This will force primary care physicians to address it, even if we don't have a cure for it."

Americans have been gaining weight at a fast pace for 30 years. All those extra pounds have resulted in a tidal wave of expensive health problems. Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease are rising public concerns. Treatment for

obesity-related diseases is costing the U.S. \$150 billion a year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports. That figure could rise by an additional \$550 billion over the next 20 years, Duke University found.

The AMA argued that calling obesity a disease could bring new treatments. The Food and Drug Administration has approved just two new prescription weight-loss medications since 1999. Making obesity a disease could pressure the FDA to approve new obesity drugs. That could spur new drug development and get doctors to prescribe them more, the council noted.

### **Giving A Boost To Exercise**

Labeling obesity a disease also might boost support for prevention programs like physical education and reforms to school lunch, the AMA added. It could also lead to employers covering obesity treatments for their employees. Companies could be less able to discriminate on the basis of body weight, the AMA suggested.

But the AMA also said that making obesity a disease has risks. It could deepen the stigma attached to being overweight. Some patients could be doomed to endless nagging — even if they were otherwise healthy or had lost enough weight to improve their health.

It might also shift focus toward expensive drugs and surgeries. The AMA does not want these to overshadow other measures like healthy diets and regular exercise.

Dr. Daniel H. Bessesen is an obesity expert at the University of Colorado. He called the AMA's shift "a double-edged sword." While the label change may reflect "a growing awareness that obesity is not someone's fault," he worried that the term disease may make people feel ashamed. People who are obese don't need to feel any more shame, he added.

## Quiz

- 1      Approximately how many children in the United States are obese?
  - (A)      12 million
  - (B)      36 million
  - (C)      78 million
  - (D)      550 million
  
- 2      What is the primary concern the AMA has with declaring obesity as a disease?
  - (A)      The label may harm obese individual's self-esteem.
  - (B)      It will cost health insurance companies thousands of dollars.
  - (C)      Physicians will not receive any payment for treating obese patients.
  - (D)      It will cost the Center for Disease Control 150 billion dollars per year.
  
- 3      Select the paragraph from the article that states how physicians will receive payment for discussing obesity with patients.
  
- 4      What role does the FDA play in the current obesity issue?
  - (A)      They are trying to declare obesity a disease.
  - (B)      They are approving new weight loss medications.
  - (C)      They are encouraging obesity prevention programs.
  - (D)      They are approving surgical procedures for obesity.