



Joyce Wong, Director, Clinical, Drug Database and Plan Management and one of ESC's clinical pharmacists, Romina Isip, examine the topic of Obesity in Canada, and the need to recognize it as a chronic disease.



THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SERIES

Obesity: A chronic disease that needs to be recognized for what it is

Over the last four decades the prevalence of obesity among adults in Canada has more than doubled, from just under 15 per cent in 1978 to almost 30 per cent in 2021, according to Statistics Canada.¹

Obesity – a complex chronic disease where the accumulation of excessive fat negatively impacts well-being and increases the risk of developing other medical complications – is a growing problem among children, too. The latest Stats Canada data showed that about one in three kids in the country was overweight or obese in 2021, compared to less than one in four in 1978.

Despite these alarming trends, obesity is still viewed by the country's governing bodies as a risk factor to other diseases but not as a disease itself. This runs counter to the position taken by the Canadian Medical Association, which recognized obesity as a chronic disease in 2015, and by the World Health Organization, which saw obesity as a global health problem as far back as 1995.

Consequently, Canadians living with obesity continue to be denied access to effective medications that can help them address this serious condition. They are often stigmatized as people who choose to lead unhealthy lifestyles and who simply lack the willpower to make healthy changes.

Misconceptions and misinformation are among the reasons why obesity today is still not recognized widely as a chronic disease. Many people don't understand that obesity is caused by a mix of biological, behavioural, environmental and psychological factors. The resulting conclusion is that if people with obesity simply improved their diet and became more active, they could bring their weight down to healthy levels.

With recent advances in research we are slowly gaining a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms driving obesity. These insights have also led to breakthrough pharmacological therapies.

However, getting affordable access to these medications is difficult because obesity is not recognized as a chronic disease by our country's policymakers. This is why health advocacy groups such as Obesity Canada have urged Canada's federal, provincial and territorial governments as well as the health insurance industry to recognize obesity as a chronic disease – a critical step already taken by such organizations as Public Health Ontario, Alberta Health Services, the American Medical Association and the European Commission.

¹ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1310009620>

Classifying obesity as a chronic disease will inevitably change the conversation around this condition and may lead to the expansion of clinically recognized treatment approaches, as well as open doors to public and private reimbursement of available drug treatments.

For Canadians living with obesity, these changes will mean a much greater chance of success in managing their condition. But they won't be the only ones to benefit. Public and private health insurers could see significant cost and system efficiencies as Canadians with obesity improve their health and decrease their risk of developing potentially life-limiting conditions such as Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Effectively, in patients with diabetes, a sustained weight loss of five per cent or more of their initial body weight can improve blood glucose control and blood pressure.²

The societal benefits could also be immense. A healthier population is, in general, more engaged and productive, with less absenteeism from the workplace. We may even realize economic benefits as incomes improve for Canadians who have faced barriers to better jobs and pay because of their obesity – a reverse causality that was highlighted in a 2018 University of Medical Center Hamburg-Eppendorf meta-analysis of studies that looked at the impact of obesity on income.³

Medications indicated for chronic weight management are not the only intervention for obesity. Improvements in diet and physical activity, backed with strong support systems, remain foundational in managing obesity. In certain severe cases, bariatric surgery, which physically limits a patient's stomach capacity, has proven to be an effective approach.

Today we have the knowledge, the clinical protocols, and the medical treatments needed to help the growing number of Canadian adults and children living with obesity. Now we need to ensure that, like all other Canadians living with a chronic disease, Canadians with obesity have equal access to the full scope of effective therapies, including medication.

Recognizing obesity as a chronic disease is a concrete step in this direction.



² Canadian Diabetes Association Clinical Practice Guidelines Expert Committee et al. "Weight management in diabetes." Canadian journal of diabetes vol. 37 Suppl 1 (2013): S82-6. doi:10.1016/j.jcjd.2013.01.025

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5781054/>