



Is there a pill for obesity?

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Can a pill solve obesity?

Is medication the answer?

How can we treat what is an epidemic of overweight?

In 2004 about 60 percent of Canadians were overweight; nearly a quarter were obese. This was not just adults as a quarter of children aged two to 17 were also overweight — and overweight children grow into overweight adults.

Simply being overweight would be less of an issue if it was only about ‘looks’ and self image. The true danger comes from the health problems associated with the extra pounds. Being overweight is a risk factor for some very serious diseases and conditions: diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, heart disease, stroke and even some cancers.

But what is obesity? Overweight? Both are measured by the Body Mass Index (BMI) which takes into account the proportion of weight and height and reflects the total proportion of body fat. A BMI of more than 25 means the person is overweight; more than 30, obese.

Another measure, simple waist circumference, has been shown to predict risk of weight related disease. Specifically, women with a waist measurement of more than 80 cm and men with waists of 94 or more are both at higher risk.

How much weight we carry and whether we are obese comes down to something quite simple in most cases. Obesity happens because of consistently taking in more energy (read: calories) than the body burns off during the day. A pound of weight is the same as 3500 calories. Given all else stays the same, reducing caloric intake by 500 a day should result in the loss of a

pound over a week. By the same measure, burning off those 500 with activity gives the same result. Though a simplification, at its core, weight loss is really simple: burn more than you take in. Easy.

Lifestyle change of better diet and more activity is at the centre of attaining and keeping a healthy weight. Some people also seek medical help with obesity and in some cases, that makes sense. There are limitations to know about, and side effects to consider. In all cases, this should only be undertaken with guidance from your doctor.

Weight loss medication comes in two main varieties. One suppresses the appetite or makes you feel full; the other reduces the absorption of fat in the bowel. Both have side effects. The appetite suppressant may lead to higher blood pressure and heart rate, headache and constipation. The other drug can result in cramping, diarrhea, gas and leakage of oily stool.

While side effects tend to be temporary, there are bigger issues to understand. Even at their most effective, these drugs will only help lose an extra

5 kg or so. Some can be addictive, and they may only work for six months. Least attractive? The weight may come back when medication is ended.

Over the short term weight loss from prescription drugs can reduce a number of health risks for someone who is obese, but the real solution, even with the drugs, is lifestyle change: diet and exercise. (You didn’t really think there would be a magic pill — did you?)

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