

TREAT Severe Obesity!

TREAT = The Network to Reduce Disparities and Advance the Treatment of Severe Obesity

Today, more than 15 million adults¹ and 2 million² children meet the medical criteria for clinically severe obesity (also known as morbid obesity) – a chronic medical condition where the amount of excess weight is often more than 100 pounds. Although frequently discounted as a moral failing of overeating and a lack of willpower, severe obesity is not only a disease in itself³ but is directly linked to a number of disabling and life-threatening conditions.⁴ As a result, those who are severely overweight are 2-3 times more likely to die of preventable disease than Americans at a healthy weight.⁵

Why? Despite the fact that severe obesity can be effectively treated through comprehensive obesity counseling and proven medical and surgical interventions, many Americans with severe obesity are denied access to appropriate treatment and suffer higher rates of obesity-related disability, disease and even death as a result. Moreover, there is a direct correlation between the extent of overweight in parents and the transmission of obesity in their offspring.^{6,7,8} As a consequence, severe obesity, especially in pregnant women, is placing future generations of Americans at risk for obesity starting in early childhood.

To change this situation requires immediate action, starting by giving the millions of Americans who are severely obese a voice in health policy. While no single strategy will solve the problem, recognizing severe obesity as a national health priority and promoting effective policy solutions will save lives, alleviate human suffering, reduce ethnic and economic disparities in obesity prevalence and stem spiraling health care costs. TREAT Severe Obesity is committed to achieving these goals.

Mission Statement

The mission of TREAT Severe Obesity is to change public policy so clinically severe obesity will be recognized as a life threatening disease and those with this serious condition will receive timely and effective treatment.

Towards these ends, TREAT Severe Obesity is working to advance policies at the federal and state level that will:

- Promote access to care and insure appropriate treatment for the severely obese population
- Reduce the disparities in obesity prevalence
- Encourage employers to cover effective evidence-based medical and surgical interventions for severe obesity in the insurance packages they provide
- Raise awareness among health care professionals that treatment of severe obesity in women of child-bearing age reduces childhood obesity rates in future generations
- Connect obesity treatment to childhood obesity prevention strategies
- Provide information on evidence-based effective long term methods of severe obesity treatment

The Case for Placing Clinically Severe Obesity on the National Agenda

In sheer numbers and its toll in death, disability and higher health care costs, clinically severe obesity is reaching crisis proportions – even though this serious medical problem can be successfully treated. Because the risk of death and disability is directly linked to the degree of overweight, individuals with severe obesity have the highest risk of developing life-threatening diseases – from heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, stroke and high blood pressure to certain cancers.⁹ In fact, studies show that those who are severely overweight are the most likely to die of preventable disease,¹⁰ including recent data on death rates of obese children that are more than double the rates for their lean counterparts.¹¹

But these statistics only begin to document the scope, impact and burden of severe obesity. There is an urgent need to put the issue of clinically severe obesity on the national agenda because:

- **Severe obesity is an escalating public health threat –**

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), people meet the medical criteria for clinically severe obesity when they have a Body Mass Index of 40 or above, or a BMI of 35 or above along with a co-morbidity, such as hypertension or diabetes. And compared to the rest of the obese population in the U.S. where rates of obesity are stabilizing,¹² rates of severe obesity are rapidly increasing.¹³ In fact, one study reveals that between 2000-2005, the number of Americans with a BMI of 40 or higher increased by 50% and those with a BMI of 50 or higher increased by 75%, a rate two and three times faster respectively than the rest of the obese population.¹⁴ Combining these data with obesity prevalence rates covering the period from 1986 to 2006, Dr. Roland Sturm of the Rand Corporation concluded: “The heaviest BMI groups have been increasing at the fastest rates for 20 years.”¹⁵

- **Severe obesity is a significant health disparity –**

Severe obesity affects many of the most vulnerable -- women, the poor and those who are non-white.^{16,17} These are the Americans least likely to be insured and most in need of affordable high quality medical care. For example, severe obesity (BMI \geq 40) afflicts 6.4% of white women, 7.0% of Hispanic women and 14.2% of black women.¹⁸

- **Severe obesity is hampered by societal and institutional discrimination –**

Discrimination against the severely overweight is a real and growing problem in the U.S. with significant implications for the delivery of health care services.^{19,20} Besides facing prejudice and discrimination in educational institutions and the workplace, many people with severe obesity also receive inadequate medical care due to the negative attitudes and perceptions of health professionals.^{21,22,23,24,25}

- **Treating severe obesity is a medical necessity –**

According to clinical studies, treating clinically severe obesity through comprehensive obesity counseling plus weight-loss surgery and other effective evidence-based medical interventions produces significant, lasting weight reduction in the majority of patients and leads to significant health improvements, including improved liver function, reduced hypertension, better cholesterol and glucose metabolism and improvements in diabetes, which sometimes resolves entirely following treatment.^{26,27,28,29,30,31,32} Effectively treating severe obesity also reduces the symptoms of sleep apnea,³³ an often overlooked but very serious medical condition that is associated with elevated type 2 diabetes risk,³⁴ as well as daytime sleepiness³⁵ in the obese population. Moreover, treating the severely obese produces long term benefits in psycho-social functioning,³⁶ mental well-being,³⁷ and health-related quality of life³⁸ as well as sexual quality of life.³⁹ In light of these benefits data, many professional societies, such as the American Academy for Clinical Endocrinologists (AACE), The Obesity Society (TOS), and the

American Society for Metabolic & Bariatric Surgery (ASMBS), have issued consensus statements supporting the use of weight-loss surgery and other effective treatments for the severely obese.⁴⁰

- **Treating severe obesity is an economic necessity –**

Although milder forms of obesity may be leveling off, severe obesity prevalence is rapidly increasing and will be a primary driver of escalating costs. Whereas health care spending in the U.S. reached 16% of GDP in 2004 -- or \$6280 per person⁴¹-- this spending is predicted to reach nearly 20% of GDP by 2015⁴² with 12% of this growth directly attributable to obesity.⁴³ At the same time, a collaborative report from the United Health Foundation, the American Public Health Association and Partnership for Prevention predicts that given the current rate of increase, the U.S. will spend as much as \$344 billion on health care costs attributable to obesity in 2018, or 21% of direct health care spending.⁴⁴

- **Treating severe obesity is essential for the prevention of childhood obesity –**

Not only are 12.5 million children in the U.S. now classified as obese⁴⁵ but compelling data reveal a correlation between the extent of obesity in parents and the increased risk of obesity in their offspring.^{46,47} However, recent studies on surgical weight loss in women prior to pregnancy show that treating severe obesity has a positive effect on the course of the pregnancy and on the development of the offspring born to successfully treated mothers, including greater insulin sensitivity, improved lipid profile and a much lower prevalence of obesity.^{48,49,50} These studies document reduced complications for the mother during pregnancy and around childbirth, such as reduced rates of life-threatening preeclampsia, gestational diabetes and other pregnancy complications.

- **Severe obesity is stigmatized and poorly understood –**

Despite its costs in terms of human suffering and the dollars spent on health care, severe obesity is both scorned⁵¹ and often overlooked -- mainly because policymakers have limited understanding of the extent and impact of severe obesity or the fact that severe obesity can be treated and prevented, thereby reducing the substantial burden of related diseases⁵² such as diabetes,⁵³ cardiovascular disease and even cancers.^{54,55} Thus, recognizing the severity of the socio-economic and disabling consequences of obesity must become a new imperative for all members of the public health community.

The Voice for Change

The Network to Reduce Disparities and Advance the Treatment of Severe Obesity (TREAT)

Severe Obesity is an alliance of obesity, nutrition, public health, minority health, chronic disease and consumer organizations and experts formed to advance the need for national and state policies that will reduce the burden of clinically severe obesity in the U.S.

Spearheaded by Shape Up America! -- the national campaign to raise awareness of obesity as a health issue launched in 1994 by former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop -- TREAT Severe Obesity has six primary goals:

- Promote a new understanding that clinically severe obesity is a serious and disabling disease that can be treated
- Raise awareness that the rapidly escalating prevalence of severe obesity constitutes an urgent public health threat that must be addressed through policies that increase access to care
- Broaden prevention strategies to include treatment to reduce the burden of disease for those Americans already obese
- Reduce the intergenerational transmission of adult to child obesity by focusing on women with reproductive capacity

- Reduce disparities in obesity prevalence through federal and state initiatives that are specifically targeted to minorities and the medically underserved
- Advocate for comprehensive care for clinically severe obesity as a standard health benefit

The facts are clear: clinically severe obesity is no longer rare and must be addressed accordingly. Now is the time for policymakers to recognize and support comprehensive treatment for severe obesity as an important intervention strategy. Policies that directly address severe obesity will save lives, save money, and reduce the inequities in access to care.

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