Obesity and women

Clearinghouse Connector – July 2016

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Introduction

Over half of Australian adult women (56.3%) are overweight or obese, compared with 70.8% of men.¹ Although a higher percentage of men are above a healthy weight, the obesity rate in women is equal to that of men (27.5% in 2011-12).² In younger and mid-age Australian women, there is an overall trend of continuing weight gain and increasing levels of overweight and obesity.³

Overweight and obesity prevalence are associated with a wide range of factors including: economic status, age, cultural background, education level, rurality, fresh food supply and availability of green space,³ however weight patterns for these factors differ by gender.³ Socioeconomic disadvantage correlates directly with increased overweight or obesity in women, but not in men.¹ Women aged 45 to 54 have the highest obesity rate among Victorian women.⁴ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 1.7 times more likely to be obese than non-indigenous women.²

Obesity is the primary cause of chronic illness in Australian women,³ and can impact on health at each stage of a woman’s life cycle.²,⁵ Being overweight or obese increases the risk of heart disease, diabetes,⁶ and 11 types of cancer including breast, ovarian and endometrial cancer.² Obesity in reproductive-aged women negatively impacts on contraception and fertility, and increases the risk of pregnancy complications (particularly gestational diabetes and hypertension) and poorer infant outcomes.⁵,⁶ Overweight and obese women and girls face stigma, workplace discrimination, and suffer far more than overweight men and boys from eating disorders and body image issues.² Obesity is also a barrier to women discussing weight and associated health issues with health providers.¹⁰,¹¹

At a population level, strategies to address obesity are now focusing less on individual behaviour change and ideas of self-control, and more on better understanding and modifying the obesity-promoting (obesogenic) environment.¹²,¹³ The primary prevention of obesity may prove more effective and enduring than secondary prevention (treatment after weight gain has occurred).¹⁴ The success rate of weight loss interventions does not differ greatly between women and men.¹⁵ Both obesity prevention initiatives and weight loss interventions may be more effective if framed and delivered in a gender-specific manner.¹⁶
There is growing evidence to suggest that health promotion strategies and public health messaging should consider obesity and eating disorders as part of the same continuum, with common risk/protective factors, and common goals (optimal health, nutrition, food habits, and body image). Further research is needed to better understand gendered weight patterns, and the obesity prevention strategies and interventions that are most effective for women. This will provide evidence to inform multi-level action to address overweight and obesity in Australian women.

Much of the literature about women and obesity is contained within general, rather than women-specific resources – as reflected in the selection of materials for this Connector.

WHV thanks the following expert reviewers for their input:

- Jane Martin – Obesity Policy Coalition
- Sonya Stanley – VicHealth. Healthy Eating Team
- Dr. Elizabeth Sturgiss – Australian National University

Overview

No time to weight: obesity, a national epidemic and its impact on Australia Obesity Australia, 2014

We can avoid weight creep: here’s how The Conversation, 2016


Prevalence and trends


Australian heart disease statistics: overweight, obesity and cardiovascular disease: past, present and future National Heart Foundation of Australia, 2015

Weight gain, overweight and obesity: determinants and health outcomes from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health Current Obesity Reports, 2014

Morbid obesity in women on the rise: an observational, population-based study BMC Public Health, 2013 – Australian study

General women’s health

Obesity and women’s health: an evidence-based review Journal of American Board of Family Medicine, 2012

Half a million new cancers in 2012 due to overweight and obesity: proportion of obesity-related cancers higher in women World Health Organization. International Agency for Research on Cancer, 2014
Sexual and reproductive health

**Obesity and reproduction: a fact file** Your Fertility (Fertility Coalition), 2015

**Interventions to reduce and prevent obesity in pre-conceptual and pregnant women: a systematic review and meta-analysis** PLoS One, 2014

**Overweight and obesity in Australian mothers: epidemic or endemic?** Medical Journal of Australia, 2012

**Development of the Blooming Together Program – a comprehensive model of maternity care incorporating evidence based behavioural change strategies for women with obesity to achieve a healthy pregnancy weight: final research report** Telethon Institute for Child Health Research (Perth), 2013

**The role of bariatric surgery in improving reproductive health: scientific impact paper** Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (UK), 2015

**Sexuality and obesity, a gender perspective: results from French national random probability survey of sexual behaviours** BMJ, 2010

Biological factors

**Obesity and hormones** Victoria. Department of Health, 2016 – (Better Health Channel Factsheet)

**The estrogen hypothesis of obesity** PLoS One, 2014

**Weight gain at the time of menopause** World Obesity Federation Blog, 2015

**Sex-specific weight loss drugs: men’s and women’s brains may react differently to obesity medications** Medical Daily, 2016

Mental health and body image

**Promoting self-esteem in overweight and obese girls** NPWomen’s Healthcare, 2014

**Technical report: from weight to well-being: time for a shift in paradigms?: a discussion paper on the inter-relationships among obesity, overweight, weight bias and mental well-being** British Columbia. Provincial Health Services Authority, 2013

**Weight bias: does it affect men and women differently?** Obesity Action Coalition (Florida), 2013

**Studies of obesity, body image and related health issues among Australian adolescents: how can programs in schools interact with and complement each other?** Journal of Student Wellbeing, 2010
Relationship between gender and other social determinants

Weight influences where women choose to live, researchers claim The Age. Domain, 2016

Obese women face discrimination in job hunt The Conversation, 2012

The food insecurity-obesity paradox as a vicious cycle for women: a qualitative study Atlantic Centre of Excellence for Women’s Health, 2012

Explaining the gender gap: obesity costs women a lot more than men Time, 2010

Lifestyle modification

Effectiveness of weight loss interventions: is there a difference between men and women: a systematic review Obesity Reviews, 2015


Middle-aged women’s decisions about body weight management: needs assessment and testing of a knowledge translation tool Menopause, 2015 and Patient decision aid used in the study

Experiences of barriers and facilitators to weight-loss in a diet intervention – a qualitative study of women in Northern Sweden BMC Women’s Health, 2014

Goal setting for health behavior change: evidence from an obesity intervention for rural low-income women Rural and Remote Health, 2014

Gender-responsive obesity interventions

Gender norms and obesity: incorporating gender norms change into clinical interventions Obesity, 2016

Evidence for gender responsive actions to prevent and manage overweight and obesity: young people’s health as a whole-of-society response World Health Organization Europe, 2011

Australian clinical practice guidelines

A synthesis of selected national Australian guidelines on the general practice management of adult patients who are overweight or obese Australian Family Physician, 2016

Clinical practice guidelines for the management of overweight and obesity in adults, adolescents and children in Australia Australia. National Health and Medical Research Council, 2013

Management of obesity in pregnancy RANZCOG College Statement, 2013
**Australian policy development**

*Obesity In: National women's health policy* Australia. Department of Health, 2011

*Weighing the cost of obesity: a case for action: a study on the additional costs of obesity and benefits of intervention in Australia* PricewaterhouseCoopers, October 2015

*Policy at a glance: promoting healthy weight policy* Public Health Association of Australia, 2013


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**Victorian policy development**

*Victoria’s Citizens’ Jury on Obesity* VicHealth, 2016. – See Appendix 2 *(Steering Group’s Response to 20 recommended actions)*


*Fat chance [Video]* ABC Online. Four Corners, 2014 – Community-level intervention in Ararat, Victoria

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**Related websites**

*Victoria, Department of Health and Human Services* Healthy Together Victoria [Program]

*VicHealth* Promoting Healthy Eating [Program]

*Cancer Council Victoria* Obesity prevention initiatives

*Obesity Policy Coalition*

*Obesity Australia*

*Australia. Department of Health* Healthy weight guide

*Australia, National Health and Medical Research Council* Obesity and overweight
Footnotes


How our Clearinghouse can help you

Women’s Health Victoria’s Clearinghouse has a wealth of information on gender in health in various forms. Our experienced health and information professionals can assist you to access this information.
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