Obesity and cancer

New nationwide advertising campaign: 1–28 July

Find out what this means for you and your patients
Like smoking, obesity puts millions of adults at greater risk of cancer

As a general practice nurse, you’ll be aware of the strong link between obesity and cancer. But did you know after smoking, overweight and obesity is the biggest preventable cause of cancer in the UK? In fact being overweight or obese trumps smoking as the leading cause of four different types of disease. Public awareness of the link is low. That’s why we are running a new national advertising campaign this July. You might find some of your patients come to you with questions.

Common FAQs

1 What cancer types does obesity cause?

Being overweight or obese increases the risk of 13 types of cancer including kidney, multiple myeloma, thyroid and gallbladder. It also causes two of the most common types of cancer, breast (post-menopausal) and bowel and two of the hardest to treat, pancreatic and oesophageal.1

Download your free infographic of the 13 types of cancer at po.st/obesityinfographic

2 How can obesity cause cancer?

Extra body fat doesn’t just sit in the body, it’s active, and can affect growth, metabolism and reproductive hormones. Researchers have identified three main ways obesity is linked to cancer. Extra body fat can lead to greater levels of:

- growth hormones such as insulin and insulin-like growth factor
- sex hormones like oestrogen
- and chronic inflammation.

And all of these factors can signal to our cells to divide more often, increasing the chance of cancer cells developing. But because extra body fat can affect so many different biological processes, and affects different people in different ways, untangling all the ways obesity is linked to cancer is an ongoing area of research.1,4,5

Watch Dr Dawn Harper’s video at po.st/drdrdawn

3 Does losing weight reduce cancer risk?

Keeping a healthy weight is the best thing people can do. But since many people will already be overweight or obese, you might have questions about the benefits of weight loss on cancer risk for these groups. It’s difficult to study, but research so far suggests that losing weight can help reduce cancer risk.6,7

Plus, the steps most people take to lose weight, like eating and drinking healthily, can also reduce cancer risk on their own. But losing weight and keeping it off isn’t easy, which is why many of your patients would benefit from your support, advice and help to access weight management services.

A 2017 survey found that only 38% of UK adults who were obese and 12% who were overweight had been given any advice about weight loss by a health professional.8 58% of GPs and general practice nurses reported always or often calculating their patients’ BMI.9 Some of the main barriers reported included a fear of damaging patient relationships. However, evidence shows that patients trust and value your advice, and find it appropriate even if weight was not the original reason for their visit. There is also emerging evidence that having conversations with your patients about their weight could make a significant impact.10

It can be challenging to talk about weight with your patients, but it should be viewed as a normal part of a routine consultation. There are opportunities that might make it easier to raise the issue; if the patient presents with a condition related to weight or indirectly through health checks and the patient might be more receptive to your advice and support if you use open questions.

PHE have put together a toolkit that provides practical advice and tools to support effective conversations.

Patients value your advice when discussing weight

For patients who don’t want to engage in conversation about weight management, show acceptance of their wishes but re-offer support should they change their mind.

“There’s no skin off your nose, I’ll come around to you.”

For example, a patient of mine who has depression and anxiety mentioned that although she was aware of the link between obesity and cancer, she didn’t want to discuss it. However, she said she would consider it if it were broached in the context of managing her weight.

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2 Brown K et al. The fraction of cancer attributable to modifiable risk factors. British Journal of Cancer. 2019
4 World Cancer Research Fund. Body fatness and weight gain and the risk of cancer. WCRF. 2018

3 Has losing weight reduced your risk of cancer?

A reminder of the link and a signposting to resources.

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“Okay, that’s fine. I understand that maybe now is not the right time. If this is something you want to talk about in the future, I’m keen to support you in doing this.”

The issue with bringing up weight is that it depends on so many different factors; how well you know the patient, what it is they’ve come in for, other co-morbidities they may have, psychological and social circumstances etc. In my experience, I find lower limb osteoarthritis and depression are appropriate cues for advising about weight.

For example, a patient of mine with depression has made excellent progress following referrals to a dietician and local exercise scheme run at a council leisure centre.”

Dr Ben Noble, GP Partner, Loughborough

Complete our CPD education on our health professional website cruuk.org/weightandcancer to help you have more effective conversations.

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No single action alone will solve the overweight and obesity epidemic

Obesity is a complex issue with many causes, but one of the biggest influences is the obesogenic environment we live in. Being healthy is difficult – from junk food adverts and price promotions on unhealthy foods to the number of unhealthy takeaway outlets. Energy-dense food is easily available, often cheaper and more heavily marketed than healthy options. There are fewer opportunities to move in our everyday lives than ever before.

All these things nudge us towards eating unhealthily and make it very hard for most people to keep a healthy weight. Around one-in-three children are overweight or obese and unless action is taken this will only get worse.

That’s why, although personal choices are important, weight loss is not the sole responsibility of the individual. Governments can introduce policies that create supportive environments where healthy choices are easier for everyone. Bold initiatives to change our environment are needed fast if the Government is to meet its ambition to reduce childhood obesity by half by 2030, and to close the inequality gap.

We welcomed publication of Chapter Two of the UK Government’s Childhood Obesity Plan and the ensuing consultations on restricting children’s exposure to junk food advertising on TV and online, and to restricting price and location-based promotions for less healthy food and drink. The Government must now ensure that tackling overweight and obesity remains a key policy priority; and swiftly introduce the strongest proposed measures.

We are running a UK-wide advertising campaign this July in outdoor locations, national newspapers and social media, to raise awareness of the link between obesity and cancer, with the ultimate goal of encouraging policy change to help reduce obesity rates.

12 Swinburn et al. The global obesity pandemic: shaped by global drivers and local environments. 2011

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The world around us affects how healthy we are

- Unavoidable unhealthy food adverts
- Confusing food labels
- 2 for 1 deals
- Tempting checkout deals
- Bigger portions
- Fast food on the go
- Moving less
- The world we live in can make it harder to be healthy

More fat, sugar, and salt in food

Fat
Sugar
Salt

Unavoidable unhealthy food adverts

Together we will beat cancer

cruk.org/health