

Weight Loss Surgery News

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Depression and Obesity – Is there a link and what is it?

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One of the most difficult aspects of obesity may be the emotional distress it can cause. Feelings of rejection, shame and even serious depression can be common. But do obesity and depression go hand in hand? Does one disease have an impact on the other? Are people fighting obesity fighting depression as well?

According to the U.S. Surgeon General, an estimated 34% of U.S. adults aged 20-74 are overweight and an additional 27% are obese.¹ About half of all women aged 20-74 are overweight or obese.¹ At the same time, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) report that more than 19 million American adults (10% of the population) suffer from major depression. One out of every four American women will experience a major bout of depression in her lifetime.²

The National Institute of Diabetes, Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) suggests there is substantial evidence that severe chronic illness, such as obesity, may be associated with or worsened by co-existent mental disorders such as depression.³ However, few studies have addressed the relationship. Current research is underway to increase understanding and look at specific questions, including:⁴

- Does treatment of depression decrease morbidity/mortality in patients with obesity, diabetes, or chronic renal disease and what treatments are most effective?
- What is the role of obesity in the depression/diabetes relationship?
- Does treatment of depression improve nutritional parameters?

One study provides possible evidence of a link and suggests it could be biological in nature. In a 2002 study entitled "A Prospective Study of the Role of Depression in the Development and Persistence of Adolescent Obesity," results indicated that depressed adolescents are at increased risk for the development and persistence of obesity.⁵ The study of 9300 adolescents in grades 7-12 found that among adolescents not obese at the start of the study, the odds of becoming obese in the next year were doubled if they were depressed.

"Most people think that obesity leads to depression, not vice versa," said Elizabeth Goodman, M.D., the study's main author. "But there is emerging evidence that mood disorders can, in fact, predispose individuals to become obese because both diseases share biological regulatory pathways in the central nervous system."⁵

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While this study was of adolescents, it has bearing on adults. This is because overweight adolescents have a 70% chance of becoming overweight or obese adults.⁶ This increases to 80% if one or more parent is overweight or obese.⁶

Experts hope that current and future studies will provide additional findings on the possible link between obesity and depression. In the meantime, obese patients should find comfort in knowing that depression is a treatable disease. If there is a link and they are fighting both diseases – obesity and depression – there may be hope ahead.

Can a lifetime of dieting equal a lifetime of depression?

Some obese people spend years, even decades, dieting. If dieting means deprivation, stress, punishment, and self-admonishment, they can be living their life in a constant state of unhappiness or possibly in a more serious state of clinical depression. Depression can be a cause of overeating and other eating disorders, leading to more dieting, all becoming a vicious circle that perpetuates itself.

Are you using food to fight depression?

Many people, even those not overweight or obese, turn to food when they are unhappy, stressed, angry or depressed. Over time, the association between these negative emotions and eating can become a habit. This emotional eating can lead to serious eating disorders including obesity. Obesity, in turn, can cause poor self-esteem, negative self image, withdrawal from activities and peers, and anxiety.⁷ People who routinely handle negative emotions by binge eating or by treating themselves to fattening, unhealthy foods may be using food to fight their feelings.

Is there such a thing as “Sugar Blues”?⁸

Sugar is one of several food substances that can alter brain chemistry and provide a mood change or short term “high.” The high, however, is followed by a “low,” a period of depressed feelings also referred to as the “Sugar Blues.” To avoid this “low,” some people eat more sugar, and the cycle of highs and lows continues. Other food substances that can affect brain chemistry and alter our mood are flour, wheat, fat, caffeine, and alcohol. It is important to understand the role of sugar and other mood altering food substances when considering the link between obesity and depression.

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