



Focus on obesity surgery and medications

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fact sheet

Being a surgeon and doctor, I have a particular interest in the medical side of weight loss. However the majority of people will not require medication or surgery for their weight loss. Another area of special interest to me is cosmetic medicine. In our society weight and beauty are closely related. Although losing weight has significant health benefits, most people who are trying to lose weight do it to 'look better'. Please [contact us](#) if you have questions on any of these medical areas.

Bariatric (obesity) surgery

Bariatric comes from Greek, Baros meaning weight and iatrikos the art of healing. In this section I will include several of the operations that are performed these days. These operations are usually reserved for people that have a BMI (Body Mass Index) of more than 40. Recently there has been some progress in understanding the long-term effects of these operations. A large research study was recently published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* called the Swedish Obesity Study, which provides a better understanding of the effects of these operations.

No-one is in doubt that the majority of western countries are experiencing an obesity epidemic that is poised to get worse. The country most severely affected is the USA, but England and Australia are unfortunately not far behind. More than 30 percent of the US population are obese (BMI more than 30) and around 5 percent are morbidly obese (BMI more than 40). There are numerous health problems experienced by overweight people, ranging from joint problems, breathing problems, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart problems to diabetes. These health problems both shorten life and reduce the quality of life. Medications such as xenical have a limited effect and can only be taken for a limited time. Surgical treatment is currently the only effective treatment for very overweight people.

The Swedish Obesity Study is a research study that has been going for 10 years. Around 4000 people have received operations ranging from gastric banding to gastric by-passes. Extremely promising results have emerged from this study, which compared people that have received operations with those that did not. For the people that received operations, weight reduction was greatest in the first 6 months and ranged from 38 per cent for gastric by-passes to 21 per cent for stomach banding. Ten years after the operations were performed, the weight loss was still substantial but less than the initial weight loss —gastric by-pass had an average weight loss of 25 percent compared to patients who had gastric banding with a 13 percent weight loss. The majority of the obesity related illnesses were improved over the 10 years and it was also noted that people were exercising at a higher frequency after their operation than people that did not have an operation. Around 3 in 1000 people died after the operation and there were also a number of complications noted after the operation. The group of people who did not have surgery actually gained weight during the same 10-year period.

So what does all this mean to you? Surgery does frighten many people. So far bariatric surgery has only been offered to people that are very overweight. The rationale has been that these people carry a high risk of dying from being overweight and the risk of these operations is therefore justified. So far bariatric surgery is the only demonstrated effective long-term treatment for obesity. Gastric banding operations can be done with key-hole surgery and carries a much smaller risk than the more invasive gastric by-pass operations; the draw back is that gastric banding causes less weight loss. There has been great progress in the area of bariatric surgery and with a demonstrated effect it should become a more available treatment for obesity. The risks and complications of laparoscopic banding (key hole surgery) is now far less than it has previously been and certainly much less than the larger gastric by-pass operations.

If you are contemplating surgery you should first discuss this with your local medical officer/general practitioner. You should also try to go to a center that specialises in these operations. To find out more you can contact the surgical society in your local area.

Medications

There is unfortunately a limited number of effective medication for weight loss and the available medications may also have significant side-effects. If you are contemplating taking medications for weight loss, you should see a doctor so that you are fully informed about the risks and you are properly evaluated before starting any medication as people have died from taking some of these medications. You should never take any of them without first seeing a doctor.