Obesity and hormones
Summary

- The hormones leptin, insulin, oestrogens, androgens and growth hormone influence our appetite, metabolism and body fat distribution.
- People who are obese have hormone levels that encourage the accumulation of body fat.
- Obesity is a risk factor for disease.
- Obesity-related disease is preventable with weight loss.

Hormones are chemical messengers that regulate processes in our body. They are one factor in causing obesity. The hormones leptin and insulin, sex hormones and growth hormone influence our appetite, metabolism (the rate at which our body burns kilojoules for energy), and body fat distribution. People who are obese have levels of these hormones that encourage abnormal metabolism and the accumulation of body fat.

A system of glands, known as the endocrine system, secretes hormones into our bloodstream. The endocrine system works with the nervous system and the immune system to help our body cope with different events and stresses. Excesses or deficits of hormones can lead to obesity and, on the other hand, obesity can lead to changes in hormones.

**Obesity and leptin**

The hormone leptin is produced by fat cells and is secreted into our bloodstream. Leptin reduces a person's appetite by acting on specific centres of their brain to reduce their urge to eat. It also seems to control how the body manages its store of body fat.

Because leptin is produced by fat, leptin levels tend to be higher in people who are obese than in people of normal weight. However, despite having higher levels of this appetite-reducing hormone, people who are obese aren't as sensitive to the effects of leptin and, as a result, tend not to feel full during and after a meal. Ongoing research is looking at why leptin messages aren't getting through to the brain in people who are obese.

**Obesity and insulin**

Insulin, a hormone produced by the pancreas, is important for the regulation of carbohydrates and the metabolism of fat. Insulin stimulates glucose (sugar) uptake from the blood in tissues such as muscles, the liver and fat. This is an important process to make sure that energy is available for everyday functioning and to maintain normal levels of circulating glucose.

In a person who is obese, insulin signals are sometimes lost and tissues are no longer able to control glucose levels. This can lead to the development of type II diabetes and metabolic syndrome.

**Obesity and sex hormones**

Body fat distribution plays an important role in the development of obesity-related conditions such as heart disease, stroke and some forms of arthritis. Fat around our abdomen is a higher risk factor for disease than fat stored on our bottom, hips and thighs. It seems that oestrogens and androgens help to decide body fat distribution. Oestrogens are sex hormones made by the ovaries in pre-menopausal women. They are responsible for prompting ovulation every menstrual cycle.

Men and postmenopausal women do not produce much oestrogen in their testes (testicles) or ovaries. Instead, most of their oestrogen is produced in their body fat, although at much lower amounts than what is produced in pre-menopausal ovaries. In younger men, androgens are produced at high levels in the testes. As a man gets older, these levels gradually decrease.

The changes with age in the sex hormone levels of both men and women are associated with changes in body fat distribution. While women of childbearing age tend to store fat in their lower body (‘pear-shaped’), older men and postmenopausal women tend to increase storage of fat around their abdomen (‘apple-shaped’). Postmenopausal women who are taking oestrogen supplements don’t accumulate fat around their abdomen. Animal studies have also shown that a lack of oestrogen leads to excessive weight gain.

**Obesity and growth hormone**

The pituitary gland in our brain produces growth hormone, which influences a person's height and helps build bone and muscle. Growth hormone also affects metabolism (the rate at which we burn kilojoules for energy). Researchers have found that growth hormone levels in people who are obese are lower than in people of normal weight.

**Inflammatory factors and obesity**

Obesity is also associated with low-grade chronic inflammation within the fat tissue. Excessive fat storage leads to stress reactions within fat cells, which in turn lead to the release of pro-inflammatory factors from the fat cells themselves and immune cells within the adipose (fat) tissue.

**Obesity hormones as a risk factor for disease**
Obesity is associated with an increased risk of a number of diseases, including cardiovascular disease, stroke and several types of cancer, and with decreased longevity (shorter life span) and lower quality of life. For example, the increased production of oestrogens in the fat of older women who are obese is associated with an increase in breast cancer risk, indicating that the source of oestrogen production is important.

**Behaviour and obesity hormones**

People who are obese have hormone levels that encourage the accumulation of body fat. It seems that behaviours such as overeating and lack of regular exercise, over time, ‘reset’ the processes that regulate appetite and body fat distribution to make the person physiologically more likely to gain weight. The body is always trying to maintain balance, so it resists any short-term disruptions such as crash dieting.

Various studies have shown that a person's blood leptin level drops after a low-kilojoule diet. Lower leptin levels may increase a person's appetite and slow down their metabolism. This may help to explain why crash dieters usually regain their lost weight. It is possible that leptin therapy may one day help dieters to maintain their weight loss in the long term, but more research is needed before this becomes a reality.

There is evidence to suggest that long-term behaviour changes, such as healthy eating and regular exercise, can re-train the body to shed excess body fat and keep it off. Studies have also shown that weight loss as a result of healthy diet and exercise or bariatric surgery leads to improved insulin resistance, decreased inflammation and beneficial modulation of obesity hormones. Weight loss is also associated with a decreased risk of developing heart disease, stroke, type II diabetes and some cancers.

**Where to get help**

- Your doctor
- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942

**References**

- Pi-Sunyer X 2009, 'The medical risks of obesity', Postgraduate Medicine, vol. 121, no. 6, pp. 21–33. [More information here.]

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Weight management

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Weight management basics
- Food portions and serves
- Healthy weight loss or gain
- Overweight

Weight management basics

- Balancing energy in and energy out
  A kilojoule is a unit of measure of energy, in the same way that kilometres measure distance...
- Body mass index (BMI)
  Body mass index or BMI is an approximate measure of your total body fat...
- Dietitians
  Dietitians offer advice on food choices to help people improve their health and general wellbeing...
- Energy in food (kilojoules and calories)
  A kilojoule is a unit of measure of energy, in the same way that kilometres measure distance...
- Food and your life stages
  The nutritional requirements of the human body change as we move through different life stages...
- Food to have sometimes
  Junk food should be kept to a minimum. It usually contains a lot of fat, salt or sugar...
- Kids and energy needs

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It’s important for kids to eat a wide variety of foods for a healthy, well-balanced diet and to be physically active. Creating healthy habits during childhood helps to ensure lifelong healthy...

- **Metabolism**
  - Your metabolism is influenced by your age, gender, muscle-to-fat ratio, the food you eat, physical activity and hormone function...

- **Simple ways to cut down on fat (slideshow)**
  - Cutting down on fat is not as hard as you think. Here’s how to maintain a healthy weight by consuming the right amount and types of fat...

- **Weight and muscle gain**
  - Gaining lean body weight is a slow process that takes months and years, rather than days and weeks...

### Food portions and serves

- **Balancing energy in and energy out**
  - A kJ is a unit of measure of energy, in the same way that kilometres measure distance...

- **Energy in food (kilojoules and calories)**
  - A kJ is a unit of measure of energy, in the same way that kilometres measure distance...

- **Food and your life stages**
  - The nutritional requirements of the human body change as we move through different life stages...

- **Food to have sometimes**
  - Junk food should be kept to a minimum. It usually contains a lot of fat, salt or sugar...

- **Kids and energy needs**
  - It’s important for kids to eat a wide variety of foods for a healthy, well-balanced diet and to be physically active. Creating healthy habits during childhood helps to ensure lifelong healthy...

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### Healthy weight loss or gain

- **Healthy weight - tucker talk tips**
  - A healthy, nutritious diet and physical activity can help you to maintain a healthy weight...

- **Simple ways to cut down on fat (slideshow)**
  - Cutting down on fat is not as hard as you think. Here’s how to maintain a healthy weight by consuming the right amount and types of fat...

- **Top tips to quit smoking (slideshow)**
  - Tips to help you quit smoking...

- **Weight loss - a healthy approach**
  - Crash dieting makes you gain more weight in the long run because it lowers your metabolism...

- **Weight loss and carbohydrates**
  - Carbohydrates are essential for a healthy body, so beware of very low-carbohydrate diets...

- **Weight loss - common myths**
  - There are no magical foods, or ways to combine foods, that melt away excess body fat...

### Overweight

- **Obesity and hormones**
  - The hormones leptin, insulin, oestrogens, androgens and growth hormone are factors in obesity...

- **Simple ways to cut down on fat (slideshow)**
  - Cutting down on fat is not as hard as you think. Here’s how to maintain a healthy weight by consuming the right amount and types of fat...

- **Weight management services**
  - Always consult with your doctor before choosing any weight management service...

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Related Information

- **Body mass index calculator for children and teenagers**
  This calculator measures body mass index (BMI), which is a measure of body fat. It is only an approximate measure of the best weight for your health. The calculator can be used for anyone from two to...

- **Metabolism**
  Your metabolism is influenced by your age, gender, muscle-to-fat ratio, the food you eat, physical activity and hormone function...

- **Obesity**
  Overweight and obesity are essentially preventable diseases...

- **Hormonal (endocrine) system**
  Hormones can be thought of as chemical messages that communicate with the body and bring about changes...

- **Androgen deficiency in women**
  Androgen deficiency in women and its treatment is controversial, and more research is needed...

Related information on other websites

- [Dietitians Association of Australia](#)

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