

Pediatricians: How to discuss weight with overweight youth

Talking about weight is a sensitive topic, especially with overweight youth who have increased vulnerabilities to negative body image and poor body esteem. When talking to overweight children or adolescents about their weight, it is important to use language about weight that your patients feel comfortable with, and to approach the topic with sensitivity.

A recent study examined terms that obese patients found desirable or undesirable for describing obesity (Wadden & Didie, 2003). Specifically, patients rated the desirability of 11 terms to describe excess weight. Here are the findings:

Desirable Terms to refer to body weight:	Weight	
	Excess Weight	
	BMI	
Undesirable Terms to refer to body weight:	Fatness	Heaviness
	Excess fat	Unhealthy BMI
	Obesity	Unhealthy body weight
	Large size	Weight Problem

Therefore, it is important for providers to be aware that certain words to describe weight may be hurtful and offensive to young patients because of their pejorative connotations. Prior to initiating conversations about weight with youth, it can be helpful to ask them what terms they would prefer you use when referring to their weight.

Here are some other examples of communication strategies to promote positive interactions with youth:

Instead of saying, “*David, we need to talk about your obesity,*” try starting the conversation with: “*David, could we talk about your weight today?*”

Alternatively, you might say,

“*David, why don’t you tell me how you’re feeling about your weight at this time.*”

For more information about this topic, please consult the following reference:

Wadden TA, Didie E. What’s in a name? Patients’ preferred terms for describing obesity. *Obesity Research*. 2003; 11: 1140-1146

Sensitive weighing procedures with youth

Being weighed is often embarrassing and anxiety-provoking, especially for children and adolescents who are sensitive about their weight. Facing the scale can be such a negative experience that it becomes a reason for patients to avoid seeking health care. Thus, it is extremely important that providers, nurses, and medical assistants use sensitivity in their weighing procedures.

First, before talking to a young patient about weight, the provider needs to review the patient's chart for weight history, noting changes in weight between visits, and determining whether the patient needs to be weighed. When approaching a patient who needs to be weighed, it is important to ask the patient for their permission to be weighed, and to use empathic, sensitive communication. Here are some examples of ways to initiate this procedure:

Would you like to be weighed today? Or: Do I have your permission to weigh you today?

Dr X likes me to ask all of his/her patients if it would be OK for me to weigh and measure them. Would that be OK with you?

Would you prefer if I weighed you facing away from the scale?

Would you like to discuss your weight concerns with your doctor?

Second, it is important to maintain sensitivity during the actual weighing procedure. This includes the following guidelines:

Ensure that weighing procedures take place in a private location that protects confidentiality of patients.

Record the patient's weight without judgment or comments

Offer patients the choice of not seeing the results if they prefer

Consider: Is measuring weight truly necessary for acute visits or where weight has recently been recorded?