OBESITY

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), worldwide obesity has more than doubled since 1980. Obesity is defined by the WHO as having abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health.

Almost 70% of South African women are either overweight or obese and this is the highest rates of obesity in women in Africa. Among South African men, 31% are overweight or obese. This is according to the 2016 South Africa Demographic and Health Survey (SADHS) and is based on the body mass index (BMI) score.

BMI is calculated as a person's weight (in kilograms) divided by the square of their height (in metres). A person with a BMI of over 30 is generally considered obese, while a person with a BMI of 25 or more is considered overweight.

What causes obesity?

Eating more calories than you burn in daily activity and exercise — on a long-term basis — can lead to obesity. Over time, these extra calories add up and cause weight gain. But it's not always just about calories in and calories out or having a sedentary lifestyle. While those are indeed causes of obesity, some causes you can't control.

Common specific causes of obesity include:

- Genetics, which can affect how your body processes food into energy and how fat is stored.
- Growing older, which can lead to less muscle mass and a slower metabolic rate, make it easier to gain weight.
- Not sleeping enough, which can lead to hormonal changes that make you feel hungrier and crave certain high-calorie foods.
- Pregnancy, as weight gained during pregnancy may be difficult to lose and might eventually lead to obesity.

Certain health conditions can also lead to weight gain, which may lead to obesity. These include:

- Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), a condition that causes an imbalance of female reproductive hormones.
- Prader-Willi syndrome, a rare condition present at birth that causes excessive hunger.
- Cushing syndrome, a condition caused by having high cortisol levels (the stress hormone) in your system.
- Hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid), a condition in which the thyroid gland doesn't produce enough of certain important hormones.
- Osteoarthritis (OA) and other conditions that cause pain that may lead to reduced activity.

Who is at risk for obesity?

A complex mix of factors can increase a person's risk for obesity.

Genetics

Some people have genes that make it difficult for them to lose weight.

Environment and community

Your environment at home, at school, and in your community can all influence how and what you eat, and how active you are.

Psychological and other factors

Depression can sometimes lead to weight gain, as some people may turn to food for emotional comfort. Certain antidepressants can also increase the risk of weight gain.
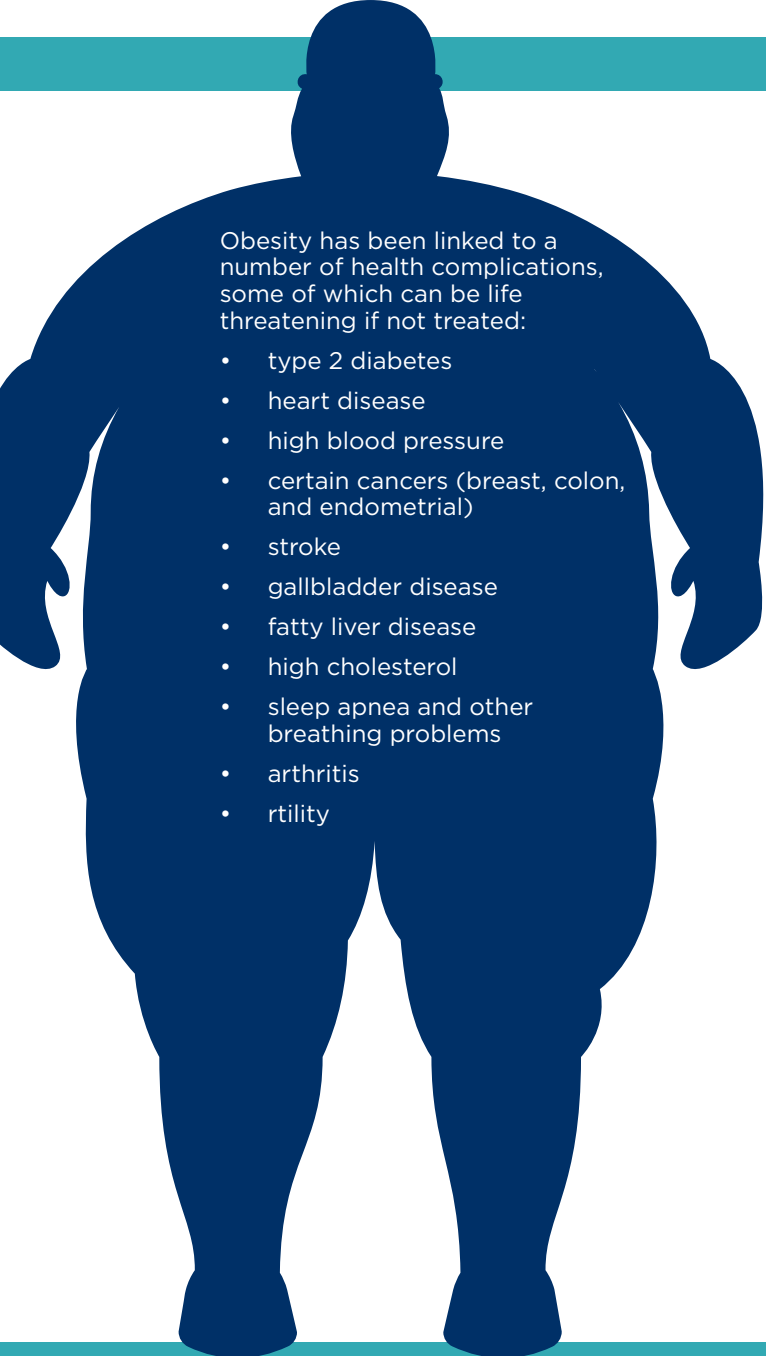
Quitting smoking is always a good thing, but quitting may lead to weight gain too. In some people, it may lead to excessive weight gain. For that reason, it's important to focus on diet and exercise while you're quitting, at least after the initial withdrawal period.

Medications, such as steroids or birth control pills, can also raise your risk for weight gain.
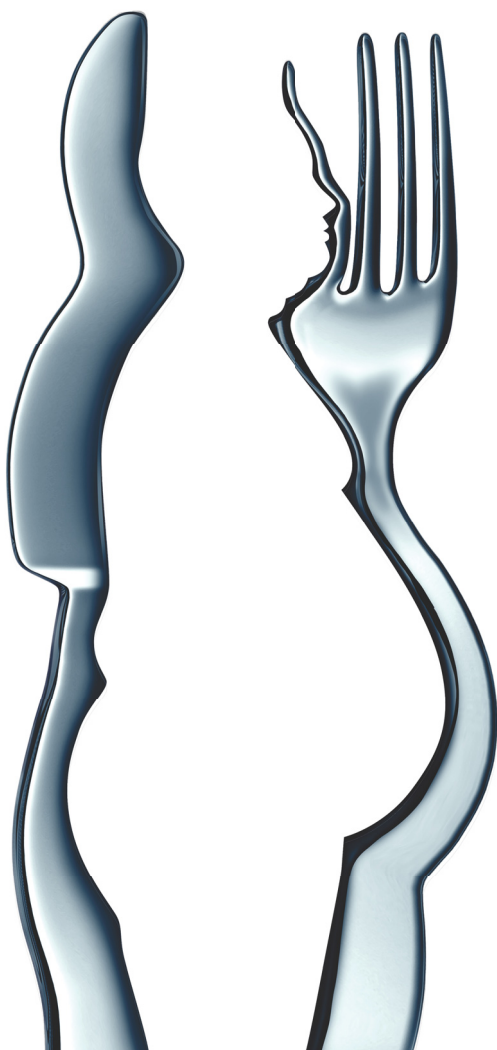
What are the complications of obesity?

Obesity can lead to more than simple weight gain. Having a high ratio of body fat to muscle puts strain on your bones as well as your internal organs. It also increases inflammation in the body, which is thought to be a risk factor for cancer. Obesity is also a major risk factor for type 2 diabetes.

Obesity has been linked to a number of health complications, some of which can be life threatening if not treated:

- type 2 diabetes
- heart disease
- high blood pressure
- certain cancers (breast, colon, and endometrial)
- stroke
- gallbladder disease
- fatty liver disease
- high cholesterol
- sleep apnea and other breathing problems
- arthritis
- rtility

How is obesity treated?

If you have obesity and have been unable to lose weight on your own, medical help is available. Talk to your primary healthcare provider, who will work with you on making needed lifestyle changes.

Which lifestyle and behavioural changes can help with weight loss?

Your healthcare team can educate you on food choices and help develop a healthy eating plan that works for you. A structured exercise programme and increased daily activity — up to 300 minutes a week — will help build up your strength, endurance, and metabolism.

Counseling may also identify unhealthy triggers and help you cope with any anxiety, depression, or emotional eating issues.

Lifestyle and behavioural changes are the preferred weight loss methods for children, unless they're extremely overweight.

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