

The *do's* and *don'ts* when talking about obesity

Have you ever thought about the language we use when talking and writing about overweight and obesity, and people living with obesity? It is common to see obesity talked about in a negative way which risks reinforcing stereotypes, simplifying the causes of obesity and contributing to weight stigma.

Currently, there are several different ways in which obesity is commonly described in the media and throughout society which can contribute to weight stigma. These can include:

- ❖ Language that does not put the person first
- ❖ The use of derogatory and pejorative labels
- ❖ Inaccurate or misplaced use of medical jargon
- ❖ Failure to acknowledge the wider context regarding causal aspects of obesity

This type of language risks simplifying obesity and its causes, fails to capture the wider drivers and determinants of obesity, and creates a negative image of people living with obesity. This in turn can reinforce misconceptions about obesity and contribute to weight stigma.

Examples of language to adopt and words and phrases to avoid

People First Language

People First Language refers to putting an individual before the medical condition that is being discussed. For instance, you should say '**a person with obesity**' as opposed to '**an obese person**' or any other critical labels. The use of people first language is really important as it helps to avoid de-humanising individuals living with chronic diseases. The use of people-first language ensures that we are not labelling an individual with their disease. This is something that can be applied in a number of different scenarios, and we encourage its use when talking about obesity.

Words and phrases to avoid	Alternative language and considerations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> x Obese person x Obese subject/participant x Obese children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ Person/individual with obesity √ Subject/participant with obesity √ Children with obesity

Labels and adjectives used in reference to people living with obesity

Words relating to people with obesity should be carefully considered. While not everyone will react the same way, it is best to avoid using certain words as they can carry a very negative connotation to many people. It is also very important to avoid using any word that may be stigmatising, demoralising or criticising one’s physical appearance.

Examples of words and phrases to avoid	Alternative language and considerations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> x ‘Fat’ x ‘Fatty’ x ‘Chubster’ x ‘Chubby’ x ‘Flabby’ x ‘Flab’ x ‘Supersized’ x ‘Mammoth’ x ‘Large size’ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ Neutral phrases such as ‘individuals with higher weight/BMI’ or ‘people living with obesity’ √ Use people-first language

In addition to avoid using these adjectives in the daily life, it is important to be notice instances when the media also uses negatively connotated adjectives and labels. As shown below, headlines can carry derogatory connotations and directly put the blame on individuals. These examples may perpetuate and enforce weight stigma, and therefore it is important that we work collectively in changing our use of language.¹

Obesity is NOT a disability and it's time **fat** people started taking responsibility for themselves

'BEING FAT IS WRONG' Forget the sugar tax – charge fat people for TWO plane seats and ban obese models, says weight-loss guru

Steve Miller said obese people need tough love, adding we need to clamp down on the message that big is beautiful

¹ The images used below were taken from the WOD 2018 report

Judgmental labels and adjectives commonly used when talking about obesity

Despite increasing evidence that obesity is caused by multiple factors, many people still see obesity as the result of individual behaviours and choices. When talking about obesity, it is not uncommon for individuals to use certain words for dramatic effect. While these are often not meant to be targeting directly a person, their use should still be avoided.

Examples of words and phrases to avoid	Alternative language and considerations
x 'Curse' x 'Strain' x 'Plague'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> √ Use accurate facts and figures √ Be clear on what the problem is rather than leaving it open to interpretation √ Avoid ambiguous language √ Be explicit on the health consequence. For example, 'Obesity can affect our health in x, y and z ways.'

Using medical jargon in non-medical contexts

When talking about obesity, it is not uncommon to also explore some of the many medical conditions associated with it. However, to help the public understand the complexities of obesity and avoid weight stigma, plain language should be used. The use of medical jargon can be a barrier to people understanding obesity and may lead to more weight stigma.

Capturing the causal aspects of obesity

When talking about obesity, there is a tendency to over-simplify some of the causes. Generally, the overarching narrative tends to place a strong emphasis on individual blame and self-control and overemphasises the role of lifestyle and food choices. While individual behaviours are sometimes *one* factors in obesity, the challenge we are facing is much more complex. The root causes of obesity run much deeper and can be genetic, psychological, sociocultural, economic and environmental. Oversimplifying the causes, and therefore solutions, of obesity can contribute to weak policy action and weight stigma.



Too often, we continue to explore policies in isolation but fail to consider some of the other factors that may have a direct impact on the implementation of effectiveness of such policies. Adopting a systems' thinking approach encourages us to look at the bigger picture and deliberately explore the complex influences on diet and physical activity that must be considered to generate effective public health and other policies. Encouraging everyone to understand the multiple drivers of obesity would help improve the societal knowledge and understanding surrounding obesity as well as help reduce weight stigma.

Writing in different languages

Many of the underlying principles outlined above are relevant in languages other than English, however direct translations are not always accurate. When writing in languages other than English it is suggested that you apply the principles outlined in this document and adapt them as appropriate.

Recommendations

To help increase understanding and awareness about the complexities and multiple drivers of obesity, as well as reduce weight stigma, we should all consider the language that we use and the way that we present obesity.

- ✓ Use people first language
- ✓ Adopt positive language about obesity and people with obesity
- ✓ Avoid the use of language that is derogatory or pejorative
- ✓ Use easy to understand language to illustrate that obesity is a health condition
- ✓ Recognise the wider causes of obesity where relevant
- ✓ Avoid the use of language that implies individual blame

Contributing to *Healthy Voices*

Contributions to Healthy Voices are welcome, particularly in the form of blogs and vlogs. When sending in submissions please consider the language and images that you have used and ensure that they adhere to the above recommendations.

Please contact healthyvoices@worldobesity.org with any questions or content you would like to be considered for submission.

We all have a responsibility to consider the images we use to represent obesity in order to help reduce weight stigma.