

# Physicians admit feeling under qualified and lacking necessary education to treat obesity

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Your primary care physician may be your first choice for assistance with most health-related issues, but according a new study led by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, primary care physicians agree they may not be the best health care professionals to give weight related counseling. Researchers examined primary care physician perspectives on the causes of and solutions to obesity care and identified differences in these perspectives by number of years since completion of medical school. They found that only 44 percent of primary care physicians reported success in helping obese patients lose weight and that primary care physicians identified nutritionists and dietitians as the most qualified providers to care for obese patients. The results are featured in the December 20, 2012 issue of *BMJ Open*.

"In order to begin improving obesity care, medical education should focus on enhancing those obesity-related skills [primary care physicians](#) feel most qualified to deliver, as well as changing the composition of health care teams and practice resources," said Sara Bleich, PhD, lead author of the study and an assistant professor with the Bloomberg School's Department of Health Policy and Management. "With respect to training and practice-based changes, primary care physicians would like to see implemented, 93 percent reported that including body mass index (BMI) as a fifth vital sign would be helpful; 89 percent reported that including diet and exercise tips in patients' charts would be helpful; 85 percent reported that having scales that calculate BMI would be helpful and 69 percent reported that adding BMI to patients' charts would be helpful."

Bleich and colleagues conducted a national cross-sectional survey of 500 general practitioners, [family practitioners](#) and [general internists](#) between February 9, 2011 and March 1, 2011. Researchers evaluated primary care physician perspective on the causes of obesity, competence in treating [obese patients](#), perspectives on the health professional most qualified to help obese patients lose or maintain weight and solutions for improving obesity care. They found primary care physicians overwhelmingly supported additional training such as nutrition counseling and practiced bases changes such as having scales report [body mass index](#), improve obesity care. Primary care physicians with fewer than 20 years since completion of medical school were more likely to identify lack of information about good eating habits and lack of access to healthy food as important causes of obesity.

Bleich continues, "There are few differences in [primary care](#) physician perspectives about the causes of obesity or solutions to improve care, regardless of when they completed medical school, suggesting that obesity-related medical education has changed little over time. Physicians who completed medical school more recently reported feeling more successful helping obese patients lose weight. However, no matter when they completed medical school they overwhelmingly supported additional training and practice-based changes to help them improve their obesity care."

**More information:** "National Survey of US Primary Care Physicians' Perspectives About Causes of Obesity and Solutions to Improve Care," was written by Sara N. Bleich, Wendy L. Bennett, Kimberly A. Gudzone and Lisa A. Cooper.

Provided by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

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