

Obesity should be renamed to improve treatment and prevention, says study

July 3 2023



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

We must change the way we talk about obesity to improve public understanding of the disease, according to a new study.

Researchers at University College Cork (UCC) and University of Galway are calling for "obesity" to be renamed in order to help the public and policymakers to better understand the disease of obesity, and drive advances to treat and prevent it.

Published in *Obesity Reviews*, the study highlights ongoing confusion about the term "obesity," which currently can refer to the disease of obesity or to a BMI range, or a combination of the two.

Dr. Margaret Steele, a postdoctoral researcher in UCC's School of Public Health, and Professor Francis Finucane, Consultant Endocrinologist and Professor of Medicine in the University of Galway, explored different or conflicting understandings of the term "obesity."

The researchers suggest it is time to reconsider whether the term conveys the reality of this complex disease that centers on environmental, genetic, physiological, behavioral and developmental factors, not on [body weight](#) or on BMI.

New appetite-control medications are generating phenomenal demand worldwide, but patients with obesity may be sent to the back of the queue on the mistaken assumption that they do not need the medication as much as patients with diabetes. The researchers suggest that clearer terminology could play a role in addressing this inequity.

Dr. Margaret Steele said, "Our focus should be on the underlying pathophysiology and not on body size. For people with the disease of obesity, treatment is not optional or cosmetic. A different diagnostic term such as 'adiposity-based chronic disease' could more clearly convey the nature of this disease, and avoid the confusion and stigma that may occur if we keep using the term 'obesity', which has become synonymous with body size."

Professor Francis Finucane described new Irish Medical Council guidance warning doctors against using Ozempic for obesity as morally problematic.

Professor Finucane said, "Semaglutide is approved as a treatment for obesity, just as it is for diabetes. There is a deeply stigmatizing idea out there that people with obesity are looking for an easy way out, that these medicines provide a low-effort alternative to [healthy diet](#) and lifestyle. But for people living with the disease of obesity, these drugs don't make behavioral change unnecessary, nor do they make it easy—they just make it possible."

The researchers point out that this is very different from celebrities using drugs like semaglutide to become "fashionably" thin.

Dr. Steele said, "This is why we need to clarify what we mean by obesity. Many of the people we see on TikTok or Instagram reporting on their semaglutide journeys do not have the disease of obesity. When we talk about treating and preventing [obesity](#), our focus should be on healthy food environments, and appropriate treatment for people living with chronic metabolic diseases. We hope this new research will help drive home the point that this is about helping people live well, not making everyone skinny."

More information: Margaret Steele et al, Philosophically, is obesity really a disease?, *Obesity Reviews* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/obr.13590](https://doi.org/10.1111/obr.13590)

Provided by University College Cork

Citation: Obesity should be renamed to improve treatment and prevention, says study (2023, July 3) retrieved 3 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-07-obesity-renamed-treatment.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.