COVID-19 and Obesity:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR YOU?

by Bharti Shetye (Dr. Abby), MD, FOMA, DABOM

In December 2019, a new disease emerged in the city of Wuhan, China that is capable of producing respiratory illness. We named this disease COVID-19 (Coronavirus) and thus far, it has infected more than 72 million people worldwide.

COVID-19 is dangerous because we have not yet developed a universal vaccine for it and no one is immune since it has never been seen before in humans. This virus has caused the worst pandemic the world has seen in more than 100 years. COVID-19 presents similarly to the flu and may include the following symptoms:

- **Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing**
- **Fatigue**
- **Muscle or body aches**
- **Headache**
- **New loss of taste or smell**
- **Sore throat**
- **Congestion or runny nose**
- **Nausea or vomiting**
- **Diarrhea**
- **Fever or chills**
- **Cough**

OBESITY: WHY IS IT A RISK FACTOR?

While it was thought that only seniors and people with immune disorders were at increased risk for severe illness, obesity has emerged as a strong and independent risk factor for severe infection and death due to COVID-19.

Obesity results in fat in the abdomen pushing up on the diaphragm. This can cause restricted airflow to the lungs which then results in shortness of breath or difficulty breathing. Contracting COVID-19 could make breathing even more difficult. The blood of people with obesity also tends to clot more, specifically in the lungs. Overall, the immune systems in people with obesity are not as strong. As BMI increases, the risk of severe illness or death from COVID-19 also increases.

The health conditions that come from obesity may also cause severe illness. It's important that if you have any of the below conditions, you are staying safe and consulting with your doctor as needed:

- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Heart disease
- Asthma (*moderate to severe*)
- Hypertension
- Liver disease
- Metabolic Syndrome
- Lung disease

STRESS AND EATING HABITS

42% of all Americans are at increased risk of serious health impacts from COVID-19 due to their weight and health conditions that are related to obesity. With a lack of medical supplies, changes to food distribution and economic and employment struggles, many people are experiencing stress like never before. The stress and social isolation alone can cause both mental and physical health challenges. With obesity being considered an increased risk factor for severe illness, patients with obesity may also have increased stress levels.

Prolonged stress can lead to coping habits that include emotional eating, night eating and binge eating. In addition, poor sleep can result in increased hunger hormones that can cause someone to eat more throughout the day. People may look to comfort eating while stressed and most comfort foods are processed or have a lot of carbohydrates. These eating behaviors may cause instant gratification but can also result in rapid weight gain.

Along with stress, there have also been a lot of changes to people's eating habits due to limited groceries or the fear of going to a store. These changes can cause people to rely more on delivery services or fast food. Eating fast food or delivery meals regularly can make it difficult to get proper nutrients or keep track of calories and ingredients. If you are relying on fast food or delivery, try making it healthy. Go for something grilled or a salad with a light dressing.

It is important to maintain a schedule during COVID-19 so that you can avoid binge eating or eating late at night. If your stress turns to hunger, try picking up a healthy snack or engaging in an activity instead of eating. This might help you relieve stress and develop healthier coping strategies.

"Prolonged stress CAN LEAD TO COPING HABITS THAT INCLUDE EMOTIONAL EATING, NIGHT EATING AND BINGE EATING."

"IT IS IMPORTANT TO maintain a schedule DURING COVID-19 SO THAT YOU CAN AVOID BINGE EATING OR EATING LATE AT NIGHT."

> **PRACTICING** *healthy mental and physical activities* **IS NECESSARY DURING COVID-19 AND CAN EVEN INCREASE YOUR OVERALL WELL-BEING.**

DECREASING THE NEGATIVE OUTCOMES OF COVID-19 IN PATIENTS WITH OBESITY

It is important to stay safe and take care of your body and mind during this difficult time. Practicing healthy mental and physical activities is necessary during COVID-19 and can even increase your overall well-being. Here are some ways you can stay healthy and stay safe:

Medically:

- Monitor any pre-existing conditions you may have.
- Reach out to your healthcare professional if you are experiencing any symptoms that might be related to COVID-19.
- If you are nervous about attending an appointment, ask your healthcare professional if you can meet over the phone or through telemedicine.

Mentally:

- Maintain hope.
- Don't watch too much news.
- Make time to engage in conversations with family and friends through a phone or video call.
- Enjoy a puzzle or a good book.
- Pick up a new hobby.
- Stick to a routine.
- Get plenty of sleep.

Physically:

- Utilize exercise videos on YouTube or social media and work out at home.
- Walk outside in the park while wearing masks and continue to social distance.
- Take a lap around the yard or the house.
- Play active games with your family.
- Try learning something new (*yoga, tai chi, boxing, etc.*).

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic is posing a great challenge worldwide. This is a stressful and disruptive time for all of us. The uncertainty of being in quarantine, social isolation and social distancing can be scary to navigate. However, it is important that we stay healthy and positive during these trying times. Stay safe and find ways to keep yourself physically and mentally healthy.

About the Author:
Bharti Shetye (Dr. Abby), MD, FOMA, DABOM, is an internist practicing obesity medicine in St. Petersburg, FL. She is an advocate for the Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) and has visited Capitol Hill to speak with United States legislators about supporting the Treat and Reduce Obesity Act. Her own struggles with weight pushed her to want to help patients and provide them with the necessary resources, support and advocacy they need. She often volunteers for the Obesity Medicine Association (OMA), and in her free time she enjoys exercising and exploring her own healthy lifestyle.

OAC
Obesity Action Coalition

ABOUT THE **OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)**

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.

VIBRANT COMMUNITY

NATIONAL AWARENESS CAMPAIGNS

ANNUAL CONVENTION

ADVOCACY

PUBLIC EDUCATION

LEARN, CONNECT, ENGAGE

The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs • Community Discussion Forum • Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections

AND MUCH MORE

OAC Community

JOIN TODAY: GO TO **OBESITYACTION.ORG/JOIN**

info@obesityaction.org
(800) 717-3117 | (813) 872-7835 | Fax: (813) 873-7838

@ObesityActionCoalition
@ObesityAction