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Sharing weight management advice with patients

We all know that the key to weight loss is eating less and exercising more. However, dropping to under 1,200 calories without supplementation leads to nutrient deficiencies, which perpetuates the myth that lower calorie diets are dangerous

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It is comforting to know that nurses are one of the few groups left who understand the suffering experienced by patients who are overweight and who recognise obesity as a problem worthy of effective action. Weight control is difficult and unfortunately it is much easier to eat calories than it is to exercise them away. A calorie gap of 3,500 calories between the calories eaten and those used is necessary to dispose of a single pound of excess body fat - 3,500 calories represent a substantial amount of exercise. If the calories actually eaten are more than the calories used by the other activities of the day, the exercise will only reduce the calorie excess and not result in weight loss. It might, however, slow the weight gain. It really is necessary to eat less in order to manage weight.

No easy solution

There is no secret to weight management: the calories eaten have to be considerably less than those being used for a sustained period of time. The continued health of the patient requires them to consume all the essential nutrients necessary for life and health, which becomes increasingly difficult as the amount of food consumed is reduced or treatments actively promote malabsorption.

If we maintain a varied selection of foods, we can feel reasonably confident that we are getting the complete array of essential nutrients. However, while the plants and animals we choose for food each have some of the essential nutrients required by man, none has them all. To get the right amounts for sustained health from unsupplemented foods it is absolutely essential that we eat in excess of 1,200 calories. Eating foods with lower calorie totals cannot provide all the nutrients that we need. The myth that dropping calories below about 1,200 in order to lose weight is unhealthy is true, but not because the calories are low - a fat person has an enormous store of calories available. The problem is that dieters become nutrient deficient.

Providing the missing nutrients, however, permits dropping the calorie intake much further without harm, as long as there are reserves of fuel left in the body. Fuels available for the body are glucose (stored as glycogen) and fat. An obese individual has about 37,000

calories in reserve for each stone of excess weight and therefore has no realistic need to eat more. He just needs to get the essential nutrients. When these come from a nutrient-complete formula food, the results are ideal: complete nourishment and minimal calories. Supplying the essential nutrients in a prepared mixture, such as in an enteral feed, assures that nutrient deficiencies do not occur.

The role of the pharmacist

An expanding network of pharmacists is offering a range of treatments for weight problems. They have the training, the respect of the public, the contact hours and the desire to offer weight management as a professional service. NICE recommends that specialists be used for extended very low calorie diets (VLCDs).¹ These pharmacists are trained and experienced specialists in the use of VLCD.

Pharmacies following this route are achieving a great deal and GPs and nurses are becoming much more comfortable directing overweight patients to these highly trained and experienced pharmacists. At the same time the availability of trained pharmacists is becoming more widespread, which is making these experts much more accessible to a wider deserving population.

Conclusion

Weight loss is more than a cosmetic issue. Weight loss can lower blood pressure, normalise blood lipids, practically eliminate type 2 diabetes, reduce the severity of asthma, bring relief to arthritics, increase the fertility of women, relieve sleep apnoea, provide an opportunity for patients to be considered for elective surgery, decrease the need for antidepressants, make exercise more possible and thus improve cardiovascular health, and vastly improve the quality of life for patients in a prejudiced and intolerant world.

Pharmacists are emerging as the weight management specialists, providing lifestyle advice, effective treatments and support, as well as follow-on help for the most difficult aspect of managing weight: the long-term maintenance of weight lost. Your overweight patients will appreciate knowing about it. ●

Reference

1. NICE. *Obesity: the prevention, identification, assessment and management of overweight and obesity in adults and children. Clinical guideline.* London: NICE; 2006.