Should obesity be considered a disease?

Key facts

- In 2022, 1 in 8 people in the world were living with obesity.

- Worldwide adult obesity has more than doubled since 1990, and adolescent obesity has quadrupled.

- In 2022, 2.5 billion adults (18 years and older) were overweight. Of these, 890 million were living with obesity.

- In 2022, 43% of adults aged 18 years and over were overweight and 16% were living with obesity.

- In 2024, 35 million children under the age of 5 were overweight.

- Over 390 million children and adolescents aged 5–19 years were overweight in 2022, including 160 million who were living with obesity.

Overview

Overweight is a condition of excessive fat deposits.

Obesity is classified by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a chronic, relapsing disease arising from complex interactions between genetics, neurobiology, eating behaviours, access to healthy diet, market forces, and the broader environment. In the last decades, obesity has expanded globally as countries have experienced greater food security, socioeconomic development, and shifts in diet, physical activity, and societal and individual behavior driven by globalization and industrialized food systems. These forces have created increasingly obesogenic environments, contributing to what is now a global public health crisis with more than 1 billion people living with obesity and prevalence rising in nearly every country

Obesity is increasingly considered a disease because it involves complex biological, genetic, and environmental factors that go beyond individual lifestyle choices.

Recognizing it as a disease can

reduce stigma

improve access to medical care and prevention.

However, some argue that labeling obesity as a disease

may overlook the role of personal responsibility and social factors such as diet, education, and inequality.

May indeed increase the stigma

It may pathologise healthy people (because the way to define obesity, BMI, is not accurate), may lead people on a slippery slope and about pushing for an aesthetic norm instead of a health one.

Therefore, obesity can be seen both as a medical condition requiring treatment and as a public health issue that demands broader societal solution

Is obesity a disease? https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2025/01/15/is-obesity-a-disease