

Weight Management

Obesity has reached epidemic proportions globally, making it the fastest developing public health problem and is a major contributor to the global burden of chronic disease and disability. The Government is concerned about the levels of obesity in this country, which are the highest in Europe (1).

In England the prevalence of obesity has increased steadily during the last 50 years and has tripled since 1980. The Health Survey for England 2008 data (2) shows that nearly 1 in 4 adults, and over 1 in 10 children aged 2-10, are obese. Currently over 60% of adults are overweight with prevalence of serious obesity increasing with age. Of particular concern is the increasing incidence of child obesity and there has been a 38% increase in childhood obesity since 1995. Though progress has been made in tackling childhood obesity (3), more than 1 in 5 children are still overweight or obese by age 3. Childhood obesity rates are higher among some black and minority ethnic communities and in lower socioeconomic groups (4).

In 2007, the Government-commissioned Foresight report predicted that if no action was taken, 60% of men, 50% of women and 25% of children would be obese by 2050 (5).

There is a significant burden on the NHS - direct costs caused by obesity are estimated to be £4.2 billion per year and forecast to more than double by 2050 if things continue as they are, with costs to society and business at today's prices estimated to reach £49.9bn per annum. Obesity is also a key risk factor for other long term conditions, together with smoking, high blood pressure and high blood cholesterol. Infant mortality could further be reduced by tackling maternal obesity, as around 1 in 5 mothers could be overweight or obese (6).

Obesity is the second most common preventable cause of death in Britain after smoking and is responsible for increasing the prevalence of diseases such as diabetes, cancer and heart disease and for more than

9,000 premature deaths per year in England. In addition, obese people are more likely to suffer from a number of psychological problems such as low self image and confidence, social stigma, reduced mobility and a poorer quality of life. Obesity is largely preventable through changes in diet and lifestyle and weight reduction is one of the most effective lifestyle changes to improve health.

Health policies and increased public health concerns mean that community pharmacists and their teams have a growing role to play in obesity and weight management through the dispensing of medication, provision of supporting advice to patients to address their diet and lifestyles and of weight management services. Community pharmacies, through their accessibility to patients, are in a position to provide advice to patients on nutrition and encourage obese patients to attend a monitored weight loss programme.

By integrating community pharmacy obesity management services within the care pathway for the management of obesity, community pharmacy can help reduce the costs of treating the consequences of obesity such as expensive coronary heart disease, cancer or diabetes care. The service will have a significant impact on local commissioning resources mainly by preventing an increase in disease prevalence and by offering sustainable approaches to managing people who are overweight or obese. For those people who do not routinely access primary care services, pharmacists might be the only healthcare professional seeing them on a regular basis. People also like the informal pharmacy environment, their accessibility and their flexibility to fit into their lifestyles (7).

Reducing a patient's weight by as little as 5% will have a significant effect on risk factors and lead to the prevention of some of these obesity-related diseases. Following the results of the locally commissioned NHS community pharmacy weight management scheme in Coventry (8), which demonstrated that community pharmacy is well placed to



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provide a weight management service effectively, and achieve statistically significant results, the Bow Group report (1) on community pharmacy recommended that Directors of Public Health should consider pharmacy-based weight management services as part of the new Public Health Service. If Public Health England can help to reduce obesity, lower levels of diabetes and liver disease, among other benefits, would result.

References

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