

# Rethinking Obesity: Looking Beyond the Scale



**T**he *Benefits and Pensions Monitor Meetings and Events* session, “Rethinking Obesity: Looking Beyond the Scale”, sponsored by Novo Nordisk, Canada, Inc., experts delved into the complexities of obesity.

The session, led by Rami Halabi, Western Canada Medical Science Liaison at Novo Nordisk, offered a comprehensive overview of obesity’s classification as a chronic disease, its impacts on health, and current approaches to management.

Joining the session, Dan Ekstrand, Associate Director, Novo Nordisk Canada, whose role in patient access and public affairs places him at the forefront of understanding how employers and benefit consultants can better support employees dealing with obesity.

### **Obesity: more than a lifestyle issue**

Contrary to common misconceptions, obesity isn’t merely a result of eating more and moving less. Halabi stressed that it results from a complex interplay of factors including brain biology, genetics, psychological and social impacts, and even medication side effects. This understanding moves the conversation away from individual choice or willpower.

Halabi says, “Why is it when obesity is established, a person finds it difficult to maintain weight loss? Unfortunately, if you live with obesity and begin to lose weight, your hormones begin to change whereby the feeling of hunger goes up, and the feeling of fullness or satiety goes down, and ultimately your metabolism also goes down overall creating a situation whereby the body is promoting a weight regain. This is what we call, metabolic adaptation.

“Again, I would like to reiterate obesity is not just due to an individual’s choice or willpower. Many paths can lead to obesity and we touched on a few from appetite, to physiological changes.”

In Canada, obesity rates have tripled over the last 30 years, with nearly 30% of adults living with the condition, defined as having a BMI of over 30. Halabi presented data showing increased risks of coronary heart disease, stroke, and heart failure among those living with obesity. The webinar also underscored the impact of obesity on life expectancy.

Weight loss, even as low as 5%, can significantly improve health outcomes

like hypertension, heart failure, and cardiovascular death rates. However, maintaining weight loss is challenging due to metabolic adaptations such as increased hunger and reduced satiety.

### **Guidelines and management**

Canadian healthcare professionals follow clinical practice guidelines for obesity management, which have gained international recognition. These guidelines emphasize a comprehensive approach, including lifestyle recommendations, behavioral counseling, pharmacotherapy, and bariatric surgery. The focus is on patient-centric care, addressing the root cause of obesity.

“The pillars of obesity management are really the interventions focused on lifestyle recommendations, behavior modification, pharmacotherapy which can result in weight loss of up to 15%, and also bariatric surgeries which can result in weight loss up to 30%” says Halabi.



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**-RAMI HALABI**

Ekstrand takes the stage to provide a comprehensive overview of tools designed to assist employers and benefit consultants in managing obesity within the workforce. The aim of these tools is to enhance understanding and support for employees living with obesity, a chronic disease with far-reaching implications.

Ekstrand explained that the motivation for developing these resources stemmed from in-depth conversations with employers and benefit consultants. These stakeholders

expressed a desire to better support their employees living with obesity but lacked the necessary tools and knowledge to effectively do so.

The toolkit presented by Ekstrand is grounded in clinical practice guidelines and designed to be agnostic and non-promotional. It offers a range of customizable resources, including the obesity modeling tool.

Based on Statistics Canada data and robust evidence, this tool allows employers to understand the cost implications of obesity within their workforce. It provides a detailed analysis of associated comorbidities and their financial impact on private and public healthcare systems. The implementation phase of the program is crucial and requires executive support.

Ekstrand says, “Once a decision is made by the plan sponsor and executive, the next step is to initiate the process. This can seem overwhelming and daunting. To assist, several agnostic tools have been developed. These can be used as-is or customized, incorporating elements like questionnaires to gauge relevance and ensure the plan has lasting impact within the organization. It’s also important to consider how to effectively engage employees in this process.”

### **Addressing chronic diseases linked to obesity**

Ekstrand emphasized the inextricable link between obesity and other chronic diseases such as depression, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, asthma, and joint diseases. The toolkit underscores the importance of considering obesity management as part of a broader strategy to address these interconnected health issues.

By providing a suite of tools and resources, Novo Nordisk aims to empower these stakeholders to better understand, engage with, and support employees living with obesity.

The webinar highlighted the need for comprehensive, evidence-based approaches to manage this chronic disease. By shifting the narrative from personal responsibility to a broader understanding of the underlying causes and effective treatments, there is hope for better outcomes for individuals living with obesity.

Individuals should consult their health care professional for complete information on this condition and available treatment options.