As a health care provider, you are in an ideal position to talk to your patients about weight control. This fact sheet offers tips and resources for addressing this sensitive topic with your patients.

**Why talk to patients about their weight?**

Two-thirds of American adults are overweight or obese. This excess weight may put them at risk for diabetes, heart disease, and other medical problems. Weight control may help patients delay and reduce these issues.

Studies show that talking with patients about weight control helps to promote behavior change. But many providers fail to do so for these reasons:

- lack of office time with patients
- lack of training on how to talk to patients about weight

Research has shown that patients who were counseled in a primary care setting about the benefits of healthy eating and physical activity often took positive action. They lost weight and exercised more than patients who did not receive counseling.

People who are overweight or obese often want help in setting and reaching weight-loss goals. But it may be tough for some patients to talk about their weight. By speaking with patients caringly and working with them as partners, you can play a key role in helping patients improve their health.

**Which patients might benefit the most?**

Measuring your patients’ body mass index (BMI) on a regular basis can help you identify those who may benefit the most from information on weight loss. The BMI measures body fat based on a person’s height in relation to weight and provides a score to signal whether someone is at a healthy weight.

Approach the subject of weight loss if your patient has

- a BMI of 30 or above
- a BMI between 25 and 30 plus two or more health problems linked to weight, such as a family history of heart disease or diabetes
- a waist size over 35 inches (women) or 40 inches (men)—even if BMI is less than 25—and two or more health problems linked to weight

See the Resources for Health Care Providers section of this fact sheet for a web link to an online BMI calculator.

**How do I bring up the topic?**

Patients do not want their health care providers to assume that all their problems are weight related. Address your patients’ main health concerns first. Allow them to talk about other issues that may be affecting their physical or emotional health, such as family or work issues.

Open the discussion about weight in a respectful way. Find out if your patient is willing to talk about the issue. Use terms preferred by patients, such as “weight,” “excess weight,” “unhealthy body weight,” and “BMI,” or ask your patient what terms he or she prefers. You may want to start like this:
“Ms. Brown, your BMI is above the healthy range. Excess weight could increase your risk for some health problems. Would you mind if we talked about it?”

Be alert to cultural differences that your patients may bring to the table about weight, favorite foods, social norms and practices, and related issues. Patients may be more open when they feel respected. See Resources for Health Care Providers for a link to the Weight-control Information Network (WIN) fact sheet Medical Care for Patients with Obesity, which offers tips for respectful treatment of obese patients in medical settings.

What do patients want to know?

Patients often want information on safe and effective ways to control their weight. A patient who is not yet ready to attempt weight control may still benefit from talking about healthy eating and regular physical activity.

Ask patients about their eating habits. Encourage them to replace foods high in fat, refined grains, and/or sugar with healthier options. Make them aware of the healthy eating resources available from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. For example,

“What kinds of foods do you eat on a typical day?”
“What does ‘healthy eating’ mean to you?”

Find out if your patients are meeting the Government recommendations for physical activity. Make them aware that being inactive, especially sitting for long periods of time at work or at home, may not be good for their health. You may want to ask,

“How much time do you spend sitting down each day?”
“Do you know how much physical activity you should do each week to stay healthy?”

See the tear-off sheet at the end of this fact sheet for tips and resources to share with patients.

How can I help my patients set goals?

Ask your patients how ready they are to adopt healthier eating and physical activity habits. Work as a partner with each patient to develop a plan. Some questions to ask are these:

“What are your goals regarding your weight?”
“What kind of changes would you be willing to start with?”
“What kind of help would you like from me about your weight?”

Partner with your patients to identify concrete actions they can take to meet their weight goal over the next 6 months.

What is a sensible weight-loss goal?

- Losing weight too quickly may contribute to health problems, such as gallstones.
- A 5-to-7 percent reduction in body weight over 6 months is a sensible weight-loss goal.
- One-half to 2 pounds per week is a safe rate of weight loss.