How to talk about 'weight' with your overweight and obese patients

Approaching the topic of body weight with patients is a sensitive issue. It can be challenging for providers to discuss health issues related to excess weight while also remaining sensitive to terminology and language that may offend patients. To help facilitate patient-provider interactions that are both productive and positive experiences, it may be useful to recognize and implement language about weight that patients prefer and feel comfortable with.

A recent study examined terms that obese patients found desirable or undesirable for describing obesity (Wadden & Didie, 2003). Specifically, patients rated the desirability of 11 terms to describe excess weight. Here are the findings:

DESIRABLE TERMS to refer to body weight:

Weight
Excess Weight
BMI

UNDESIRABLE TERMS to refer to body weight:

Fatness	Heaviness
Excess fat	Unhealthy BMI
Obesity	Unhealthy body weight
Large size	Weight Problem

It is helpful for providers to be aware of this language, as certain words to describe weight may be hurtful and offensive to patients because of their pejorative connotations. Using descriptors that are perceived negatively by patients may also jeopardize important discussions about health. Prior to initiating conversations about weight with your patients, you may want to ask them what terms they would prefer you use when referring to their weight.

Here are some other examples of communication strategies to promote positive interactions:

> Instead of saying, *"Mrs. Smith, we need to talk about your obesity,"* try starting the conversation with: *"Mrs. Smith, could we talk about your weight today?"*

Alternatively, you might say,

> *"Mr. Johnson, why don't you tell me how you're feeling about your weight at this time. What are your goals now?"*

For more information about this topic, please consult the following reference:

Wadden TA, Didie E. What's in a name? Patients' preferred terms for describing obesity. *Obesity Research.* 2003; 11: 1140-1146.