

AMA Says Obesity Is a Disease Warns Against 'Prolonged Sitting' at Work

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By: Susan Jones

The American Medical Association (AMA), the nation's largest physician organization, voted to classify obesity as a disease at its annual meeting Tuesday in Chicago.



“Recognizing obesity as a disease will help change the way the medical community tackles this complex issue that affects approximately one in three Americans,” said AMA board member Patrice Harris, M.D. “The AMA is committed to improving health outcomes and is working to reduce the incidence of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, which are often linked to obesity.”

Among other actions, the AMA also adopted a policy recognizing the potential risks of prolonged sitting -- and encouraging employers, employees and others to provide alternatives to sitting, such work stations where people must stand.

“Prolonged sitting, particularly in work settings, can cause health problems and encouraging workplaces to offer employees alternatives to sitting all day will help to create a healthier workforce,” Harris said.

The AMA's vote to classify obesity as a disease will improve the lives of millions of people here and abroad, says The Obesity Society, a group dedicated to the study of the increasingly prevalent health problem.

The society says it has long-recognized obesity -- determined by a height-weight calculation -- as a disease and encouraged this classification.

"Obesity is a complex condition with numerous causes, many of which (genetic, environmental) are largely beyond an individual's control," the society said Wednesday in a news release. "The disease is a driver of much suffering, ill health and earlier mortality, and people affected are too often subject to enormous societal stigma and discrimination.

"This vital recognition of obesity as a disease can help to ensure more resources are dedicated to needed research, prevention and treatment; encourage healthcare professionals to recognize obesity treatment as a needed and respected vocation; and reduce the stigma and discrimination experienced by the millions affected."

In an earlier white paper on obesity, the Society noted the various advantages of classifying it as a disease:

-- Were obesity to be widely viewed as a disease, it is likely that insurers would feel greater pressure to remove the exclusion of obesity in their health-care plans.

(Under Obamacare, obesity could be covered as a pre-existing condition.) "[I]t is difficult to see a negative effect in terms of health insurance reimbursement," the paper said.

-- Labeling obesity a disease might enhance society's ability to use legal means to protect obese persons from discrimination.

-- If obesity were widely seen as a disease, it is likely that there would be an increase in the attention it receives in medical schools. It might also result in an increase in practitioners who engage in obesity treatment.

According to The Obesity Society, the AMA joins a number of leading organizations that have previously classified obesity as a disease, including the National Institutes of Health (1998), the Social Security Administration (1999), the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (2004), The Obesity Society (2008) and the American Association for Clinical Endocrinology (2012.)

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