

Weight Loss and Bariatric Surgery

For many people, the start of a new year can cause stress. Some feel the need to create resolutions and many of these involve weight loss to some degree – especially after the holiday season.

Whether you gained a few extra pounds after the holidays or are someone who has struggled with your weight for years, losing weight and healthy eating can seem daunting at times. Dr. Kidanu Birhanu, an OSF HealthCare internal medicine and medical weight loss specialist, says recognizing and committing to changing negative behaviors is the first step.

“Once a person has decided to lose weight and why they want to lose weight, they should look at some of the things they do every day. Then, figure out which things effect their weight and if they are willing to change those behaviors,” says Dr. Birhanu.

Journaling and using smart phone apps can help you keep track of your daily eating habits and help identify which areas you would like to focus on improving. This is why Dr. Birhanu says it is important to recognize your behaviors before making any drastic changes.

“What do you want to achieve, and what are you willing to change? In other words, if a person eats when they are stressed or because the food is there, then are you willing to get rid of some of these things that predispose you to overeating?” Dr. Birhanu adds.

Binge-eating is the most common eating disorder in the U.S., according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) which is the main reason people tend to gain unwanted pounds. Dr. Birhanu does not recommend avoiding “bad” foods altogether, but rather changing daily habits to be able to enjoy these foods in moderation once you identify the root cause of any negative behaviors. This will also help change your relationship with food in the long run to a positive one.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends following three “Rs” for improving your eating habits: **Reflect** on all of your specific eating habits, both bad and good, and your common triggers for unhealthy eating; **Replace** your unhealthy eating habits with healthier ones; and **Reinforce** your new, healthier eating habits. And while exercise can certainly aid in weight loss, focusing on your food consumption is key.

“Some people justify overeating after they exercise. Our bodies are very efficient – you can burn a small amount of calories and do a lot of work. And each time you exercise, you become more efficient. But I cannot tell people to depend on exercise alone for losing weight. But what does exercise do? It helps you with your overall health, cholesterol, and is good for the brain,” explains Dr. Birhanu.

According to the CDC, the prevalence of obesity in the U.S. is about 42% - which is nearly half of all Americans. If your body mass index (BMI) is 30 or higher, it falls within the obesity range. However, overeating is not the only contributing factor for obesity. Behavior, environment, and genetics all play a role. For people who fall into this category, you may be a good candidate for bariatric (weight loss) surgery.

“If a person has a BMI of 35 and above with comorbidities such as diabetes, hypertension, and sleep apnea, they are good candidates for bariatric surgery. Or, if the BMI is over 40 without comorbidities,” Dr. Birhanu explains.

Talking with your primary care provider is the first step in any weight loss plan – especially when considering bariatric surgery. Your provider can help you learn your BMI, help you create a healthy, maintainable diet, and can work with you throughout your entire journey. He or she will also be able to help determine if you are a candidate for weight loss surgery. However, it is important to first develop a plan that works for you and practice sticking to that plan.

“You have to change your behavior – bariatric surgery by itself is not enough. The surgery is easy, it’s what happens after. Are you willing to visit the surgeon or the nutritionist afterwards? Are you willing to avoid drinking sugary drinks? Things like that,” says Dr. Birhanu.

Most importantly, permanent weight loss is a marathon, not a sprint. Talk with your primary care provider if losing weight is one of your goals. And if you do not have a primary care provider, find one at www.osfhealthcare.org.