

Script – Print – Decoding the underlying factors of obesity

The music world was stunned to learn that the recent passing of former American Idol singer Mandisa was the result of complications from class III obesity. Mandisa, who was found in her Tennessee home in April, was 47.

Class III obesity is defined as a person that has a body mass index (BMI) of 40 or higher or a BMI of 35 or higher and experiencing obesity-related health conditions. In simple terms, BMI is a ratio of height to weight.

"We know the heavier we are, the higher risk we have for things like diabetes, like high blood pressure for acid reflux or sleep apnea, the things that actually are causing damage to our bodies," says Nicole O'Neill, a registered dietitian with OSF HealthCare.

Obesity is a major problem in the U.S. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), it affects four out of 10 people in this country. Class III obesity is on the rise and affects 6% of adults nationwide.

Ideally, a healthy BMI range is 18.5 to 24.9. However, body fat isn't the only factor of overall health. There's genetics, activity level, smoking, drinking alcohol and mental health that all have an impact on the chance of developing health problems.

There are dozens of health risks associated with obesity including Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke.

Mandisa was transparent about her battle with mental health issues, which included turning to comfort foods during tough times. O'Neill works with clients who are going through their own struggles with weight issues and developing a healthy relationship with food.

"A lot of times it really depends on what the root cause of the actual weight gain is," she says. "Is it someone who's stressed out and is eating their feelings? Then we have to look at that. Is it someone that has an injury and they're no longer able to exercise? In that case, we try to give them modified exercises. We're always going to look at diet though."

O'Neill says the goal is to create a food plan that balances the calorie load. That includes coming up with well-balanced meals featuring plenty of fruits and vegetables, which have only 17 calories per ounce on average.

"Every person is so different. We have to take an individualized approach with each person," she says. "What works for me probably isn't going to work for you or anybody else."

In addition to working with a dietitian, O'Neill encourages clients to seek other professional help as well.

"I recommend people see a counselor because it's important. They're trained to know if you're depressed or you're anxious. They have the tools to say 'Alright, when you feel this way, do this instead of turning to food.'"

She adds that it's important for people to know that it's never too late to make healthy lifestyle changes. They can include slight lifestyle and diet modifications. And they don't have to happen all at once.

"It can be small, incremental steps, and that's how most people do well," O'Neill says. "Take one bottle of soda away and replace it with a glass of water. Take one cheeseburger away a week and add a salad so that they're sustainable changes that feel doable."

People who think they could be helped by the new class of weight loss drugs should talk to their medical provider about the benefits in connection with a plan to make lifestyle changes. For more information on weight loss, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).