



Rose and Amélie, painting by Edvard Munch / WikiArt

## The Essential Role of Advocacy for Progress in Obesity Care

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August 9, 2025

# Disclosures

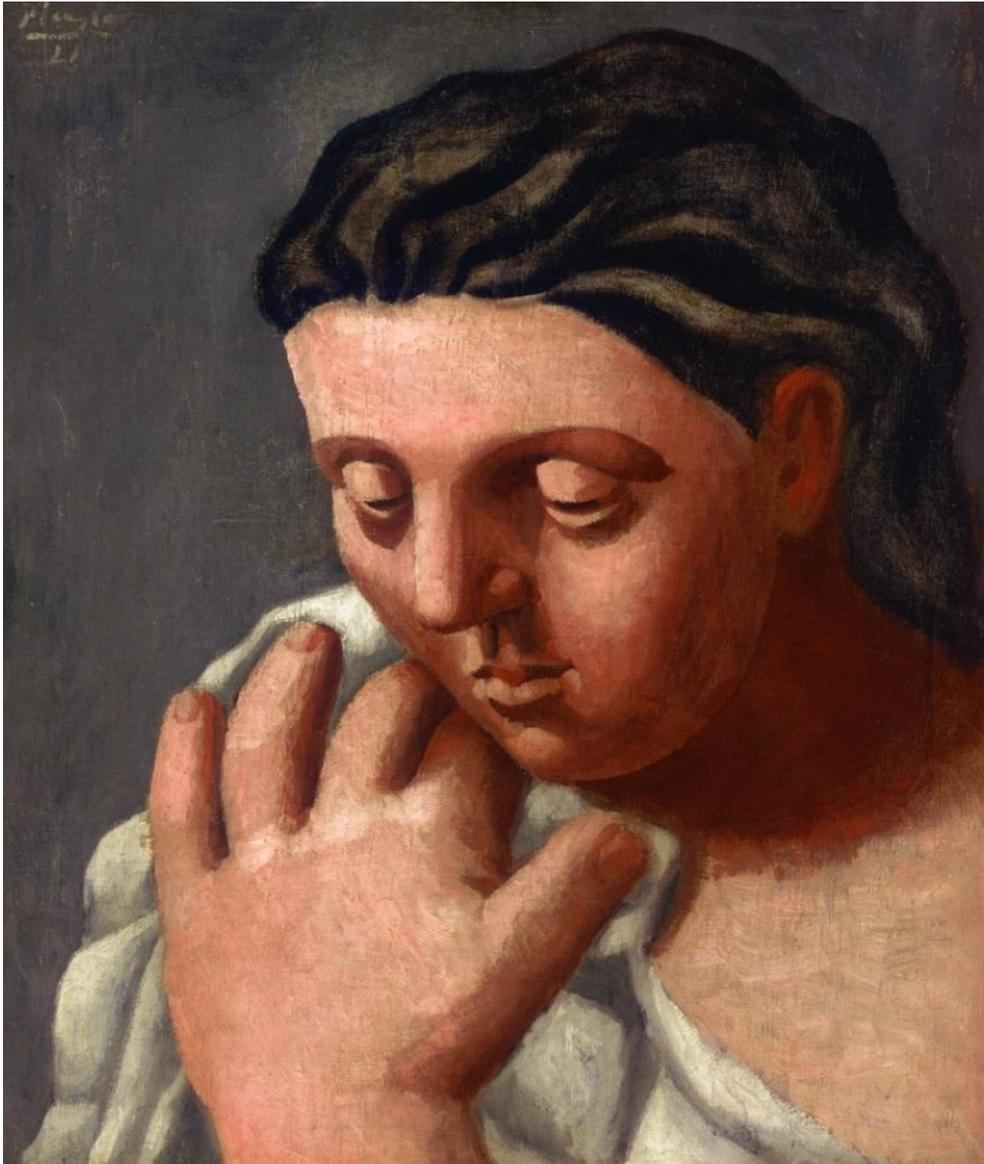
- **Professional fees**
  - Amgen
  - Boehringer Ingelheim
  - Emerald Lake Safety
  - Novo Nordisk
  - Nutrisystem
  - Roman Health Ventures
- **Personal biases that favor:**
  - Evidence-based interventions, both prevention and treatment
  - Respect for people living with obesity
  - Critical thinking about all evidence

# Presentation Objectives



*Sycamore Gap Tree By Night, photograph by Clementp.fr / Wikimedia Commons*

- Describe the gap between
  - Scientific understanding of obesity and
  - Public policy for addressing it
- Discuss progress in closing that gap
- Identify the challenges that remain and strategies to address them



*Woman's Head and Hand, painting by Pablo Picasso / WikiArt*

## The Essential Role of Advocacy: **The Gap Between Obesity Science and Public Policy**

# Key Facts About Obesity vs Prevailing Bias

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- It is undeniable that obesity is a chronic disease.

# Key Facts About Obesity vs Prevailing Bias

- It is undeniable that obesity is a chronic disease.

April 28, 1993

**JAMA**<sup>®</sup>

## Futility and Avoidance

### Medical Professionals in the Treatment of Obesity

Arthur Frank, MD

JAMA. 1993;269(16):2132-2133. doi:10.1001/jama.1993.03500160102041

#### Abstract

**T**WENTY years ago, I changed course in my internal medicine practice and decided, rather deliberately, to work on the problem of obesity. My friends, my colleagues, and my family thought I was crazy. The warnings were clear. "Don't risk your credibility and your career." "Don't venture into a part of medicine that no one takes seriously." "Don't move into the world of quacks and charlatans."



Source: Working group of the international obesity collaborative

# Key Facts About Obesity vs Prevailing Bias

- It is undeniable that obesity is a chronic disease.
- Obesity is driven by powerful underlying biology, not choice.

*The best place to start is by simply telling the patient the truth.  
“Sir or Madam, it’s not OK to be obese. Obesity is bad. You are overweight because you eat too much. You also need to exercise more. Your obesity cannot be blamed on the fast food or carbonated beverage industry or on anyone or anything else.  
You weigh too much because you eat too much.  
Your health and your weight are your responsibility.”*

Robert Doroghazi, MD  
AJM, Mar 2015

# Key Facts About Obesity vs Prevailing Bias

- It is undeniable that obesity is a chronic disease.
- **Obesity is driven by powerful underlying biology, not choice.**



# Key Facts About Obesity vs Prevailing Bias

- It is undeniable that obesity is a chronic disease.
- Obesity is driven by powerful underlying biology, not choice.
- The many health effects of excess weight can start early.

The New York Times

OPINION  
GUEST ESSAY

## Why the New Obesity Guidelines for Kids Terrify Me

By Virginia Sole-Smith

Ms. Sole-Smith is the author of the forthcoming book "Fat Talk: Parenting in the Age of Diet Culture."

# Key Facts About Obesity vs Prevailing Bias

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OPINION COMMENTARY Follow

## *RFK Jr. Is Right: Kids Don't Need Weight-Loss Drugs*

Too many young people are prescribed pills for mental illness. Are we repeating history with GLP-1s?

By Jillian Lederman  
Feb. 5, 2025 4:55 pm ET

# Key Facts About Obesity vs Prevailing Bias

- It is undeniable that obesity is a chronic disease.
- Obesity is driven by powerful underlying biology, not choice.
- The many health effects of excess weight can start early.
- **Obesity is treatable.**

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## I No Longer Think GLP-1s Are the Answer

— The drugs "work" but may be working against us long-term

by Christopher McGowan, MD

January 30, 2025 · 4 min read

The result? Many patients cycle on and off treatment, and in the end, the only thing they've lost is money -- upwards of **\$12,000 per year** (if their insurance doesn't cover it, and most plans don't).

# Key Facts About Obesity vs Prevailing Bias

- It is undeniable that obesity is a chronic disease.
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**“Bariatric surgery remains underutilized despite its proven efficacy in the management of obesity... overestimations of surgical risks and postoperative complications are common.”**

[Home](#) > [Obesity Surgery](#) > [Article](#)

## **Providers' Knowledge and Perceptions of Bariatric Surgery: a Systematic Review**

[Review](#) | [Open access](#) | Published: 23 September 2023

Volume 33, pages 3571–3601, (2023) [Cite this article](#)



**Obesity Surgery**

# Key Facts About Obesity vs Prevailing Bias

- It is undeniable that obesity is a chronic disease.
- Obesity is driven by powerful underlying biology, not choice.
- The many health effects of excess weight can start early.
- Obesity is treatable.
- **Weight bias, stigma, and discrimination are harmful.**

**“Medicine, in particular, has to speak up and say that there are going to be consequences if you are morbidly obese.”**

Arthur L. Caplan, PhD

On Medscape, Oct 22, 2022

# Key Facts About Obesity vs Prevailing Bias

- It is undeniable that obesity is a chronic disease.
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- The many health effects of excess weight can start early.
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- **Weight bias, stigma, and discrimination are harmful.**

*“Sometimes patients need a spanking”*

A leading metabolic surgeon  
March, 2025

# Prevailing Bias Often Wins Over Facts on Obesity

- It is undeniable that obesity is a chronic disease.
- Obesity is driven by powerful underlying biology, not choice.
- The many health effects of excess weight can start early.
- Obesity is treatable.
- Weight bias, stigma, and discrimination are harmful.
- *“Weight loss is the answer”*
- *“Let’s make the healthy choice the easy choice”*
- *“Maybe they’ll grow out of it”*
- *“Prevention is the best answer”*
- *“They did this to themselves”*

# So Some Policymakers Still Resist Treatment

The New York Times

OPINION  
GUEST ESSAY

## The Miracle Weight-Loss Drug Is Also a Major Budgetary Threat

March 4, 2024



# And Rely on Prevention Strategies That Have Little Effect on Obesity



Nathalie, photograph © Garen Dibartolomeo

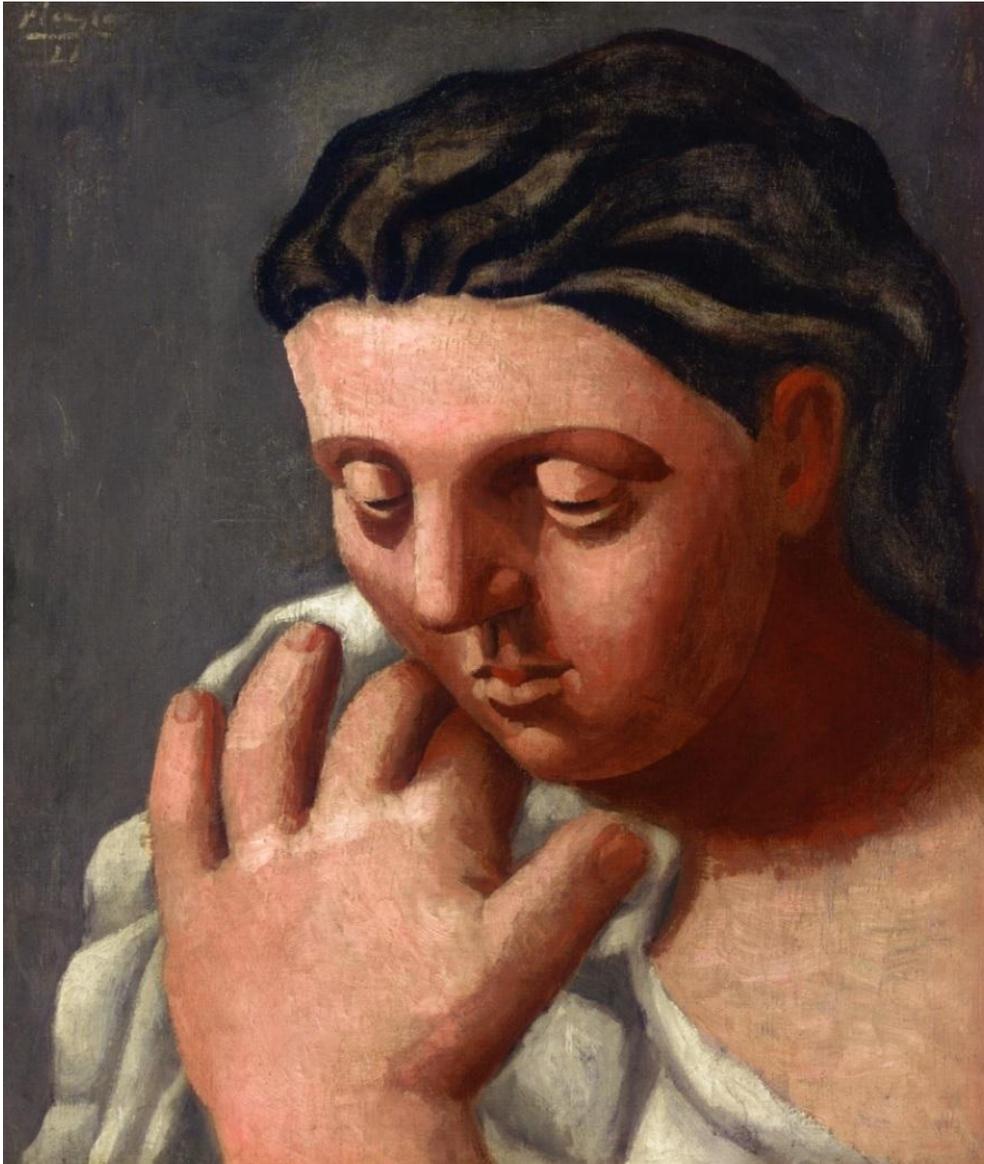
*“Prevention obviously has to be the primary strategy for dealing with obesity, because there’s just too much obesity to treat.”*

# And Rely on Prevention Strategies That Have Little Effect on Obesity



Robert F. Kennedy Jr, photograph by Gage Skidmore, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

*“Giving good food, three meals a day to every man, woman and child in our country, could solve the obesity and diabetes epidemic overnight.”*



*Woman's Head and Hand, painting by Pablo Picasso / WikiArt*

## The Essential Role of Advocacy: **Progress in Closing the Gap with Science**

# Obesity Science and Care Are Advancing Radically

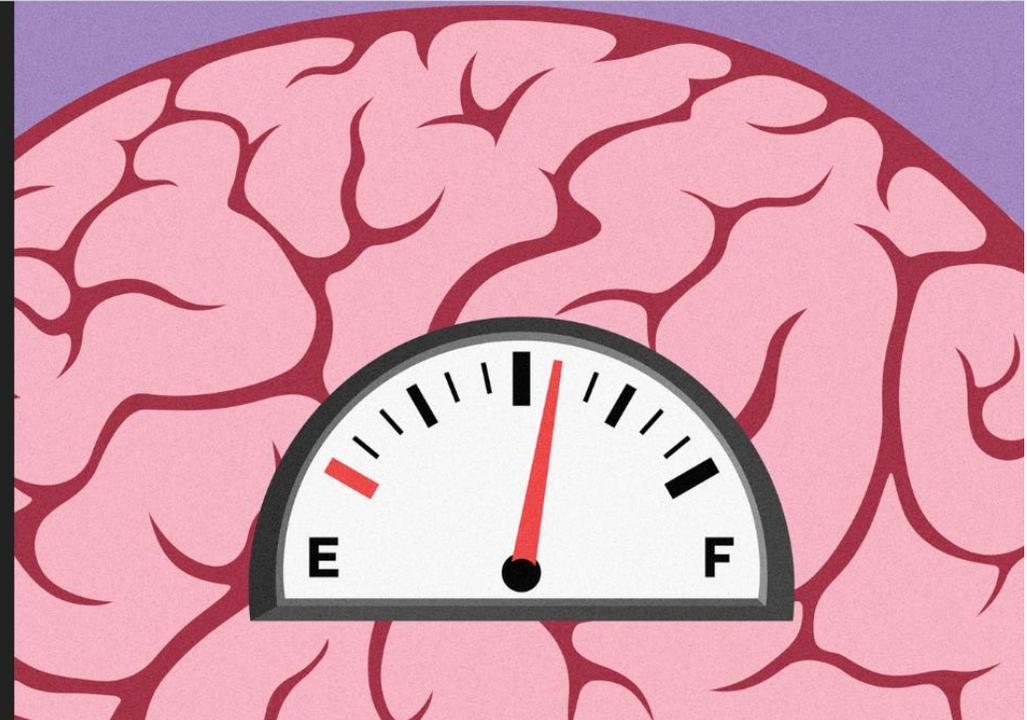
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### Ozempic Settles the Obesity Debate: It's Biology Over Willpower

Weight-loss drugs affect the brain in ways that help researchers understand how the body regulates weight



# Advances Are Prompting New Thinking

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EXCLUSIVE PHARMA

### Medicare Opens Door for Covering Obesity Drugs

The agency says health plans may pay for the drugs if used to prevent heart attacks and strokes

By Peter Loftus [Follow](#)

Updated March 21, 2024 3:19 pm ET



# Advances Are Prompting New Thinking

**THE HILL**

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## **RFK Jr. considering 'framework' for Medicaid, Medicare coverage of GLP-1s**

BY SARAH FORTINSKY - 04/10/25 6:12 PM ET

# Advances Are Prompting New Thinking

**The Washington Post**  
*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

**Health** Health Care Medical Mysteries Science Well+Being

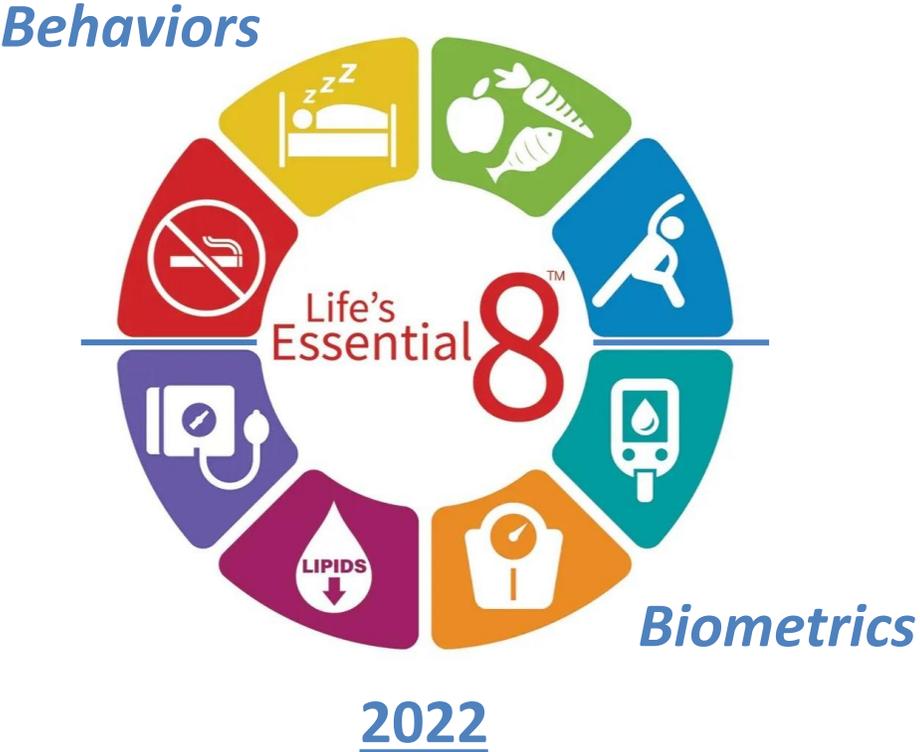
**top EXCLUSIVE**

## Medicare, Medicaid plan to experiment with covering weight loss drugs

The Trump administration is planning an experiment to cover weight loss drugs under Medicare and Medicaid, potentially benefiting millions of Americans struggling with obesity.

Updated August 1, 2025

# Shifting from Behavior to Biology, from Blame to Care





Source: Allison Hemenstall, MD, MPH, via Twitter

# Stepping Back from the False Dichotomy of Prevention Versus Treatment

# A Bumpy Ride Ahead to Claim the Potential of Obesity Care to Improve Population Health

## Improving Population Health

- Scalable interventions that have long-term evidence of improved health outcomes

## Reducing Costs

- Possible for some clinical subgroups; will improve as price of newer AOMs falls
- Until then, focus on improving affordability and treating those most likely to benefit

## Enhancing Patient Care Experience

- Reducing weight stigma in health care

## Fostering Care-Team Wellbeing

- Designing care pathways that are feasible and reduce clinician burnout

## Health Equity

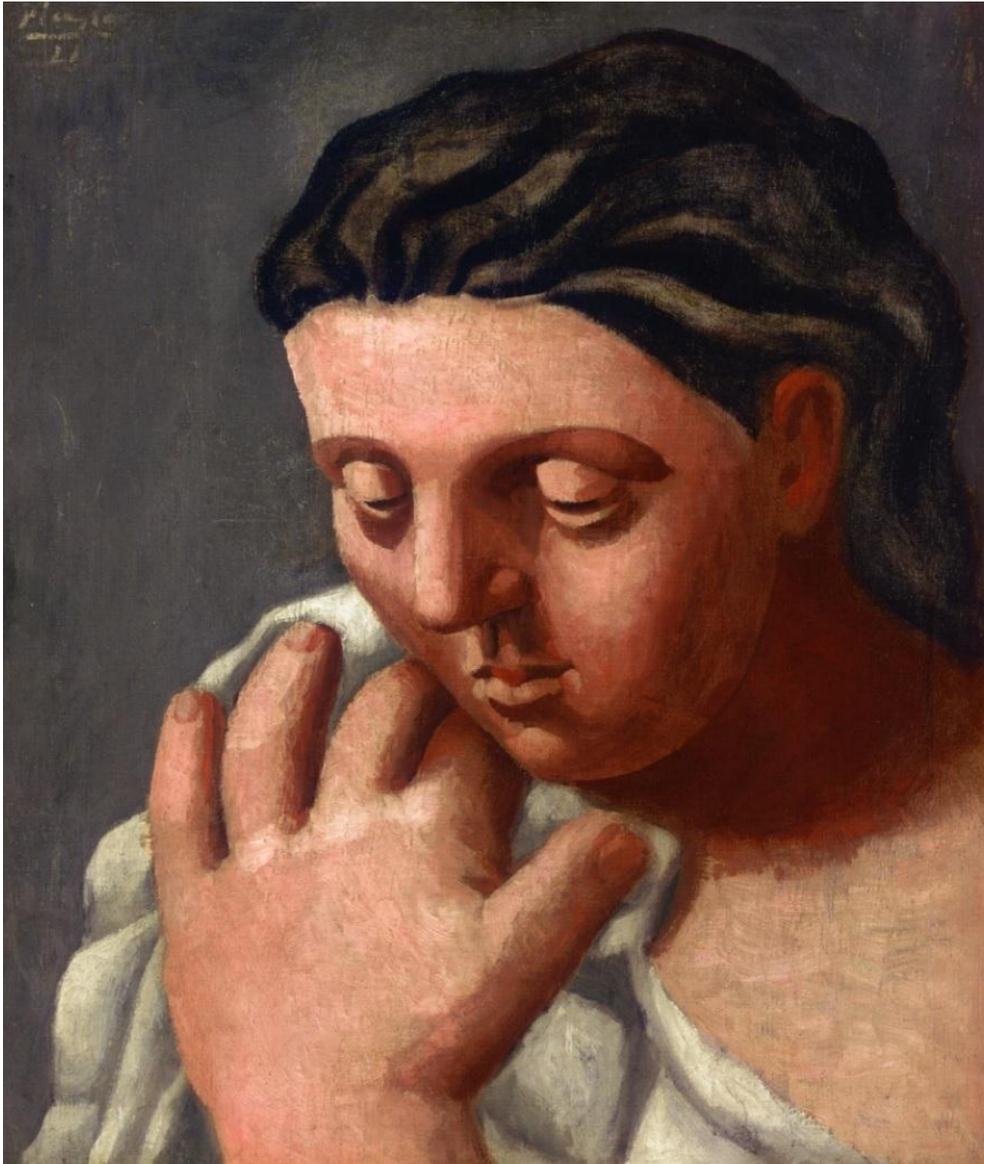
- Insuring opportunity for all people to access effective treatment

# The Future of Prevention Is Bright and Will Be Different

- Obesity care can prevent disease progression
- It's evolving to prevent complications
  - Cardiovascular
  - Metabolic
  - Oncologic
  - Respiratory
  - Hepatic
  - Musculoskeletal
  - Renal
- Current understanding of obesity drivers is incomplete
- Better insight will bring effective primordial and primary prevention



*Future, painting by Giacomo Balla / WikiArt*



*Woman's Head and Hand, painting by Pablo Picasso / WikiArt*

## The Essential Role of Advocacy: Challenges and Strategies

# Essential Advocacy for Progress in Obesity



War Production poster by J. Howard Miller

- Reject bias and stigma
- Stick to the facts
- Let go of false presumptions
- Foster a deeper understanding of obesity science
- Seek effective primary prevention
- Build systems to deliver better care

# Reject Bias and Stigma

Dimension	Explicit Bias Trend 2007-2020	Implicit Bias Trend 2007-2020
Sexuality	↓	↓
Race	↓	↓
Skin Tone	↓	↓
Age	↓	↔
Disability	↓	↔
Weight	↓	↑ ↔

*Explicit bias no longer goes unnoticed, but implicit bias is sneaky and prevalent*

Source: Charlesworth & Banaji, 2022, *Psychological Science*

# Build Awareness of Key Facts

- It is undeniable that obesity is a chronic disease.
- Obesity is driven by powerful underlying biology, not choice.
- The many health effects of excess weight can start early.
- Obesity is treatable.
- Weight bias, stigma, and discrimination are harmful.

# Let Go of False Presumptions

*We don't have to choose between obesity prevention and obesity care...*



Source: Allison Hemenstall, MD, MPH, via Twitter

# Let Go of False Presumptions

*...Because good obesity care is indeed preventive care.*



Source: Allison Hemenstall, MD, MPH, via Twitter

# Let Go of False Presumptions

*Recognizing the importance of physiology does not diminish the value of lifestyle strategies for coping*

**Obesity**

**Nicola Davis**  
Science  
correspondent

🐦@NicolaKSDavis

Sun 5 Feb 2023

**New diabetes drugs do not tackle root causes of obesity, experts warn**

**Doctors say preventing obesity by avoiding unhealthy food is better than trying to reverse its effects**



# Let Go of False Presumptions

*We don't have to choose between caring for people who live with obesity or live with an eating disorder*



# Let Go of False Presumptions

*BMI alone is not a measure of health,  
but it can be suggestive of excess adiposity*

 The New York Times

## Is B.M.I. a Scam?

There are few single measures in health care that seem to carry as much weight as body mass index, or B.M.I. We encounter it not just at...

May 18, 2021



# Let Go of False Presumptions

*People living with obesity are no more or less worthy of medical care than those living with diabetes or other chronic diseases*



People

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## Anthony Anderson on the Weight Loss Drug Trend That's 'Creating a Shortage' for Diabetes Patients

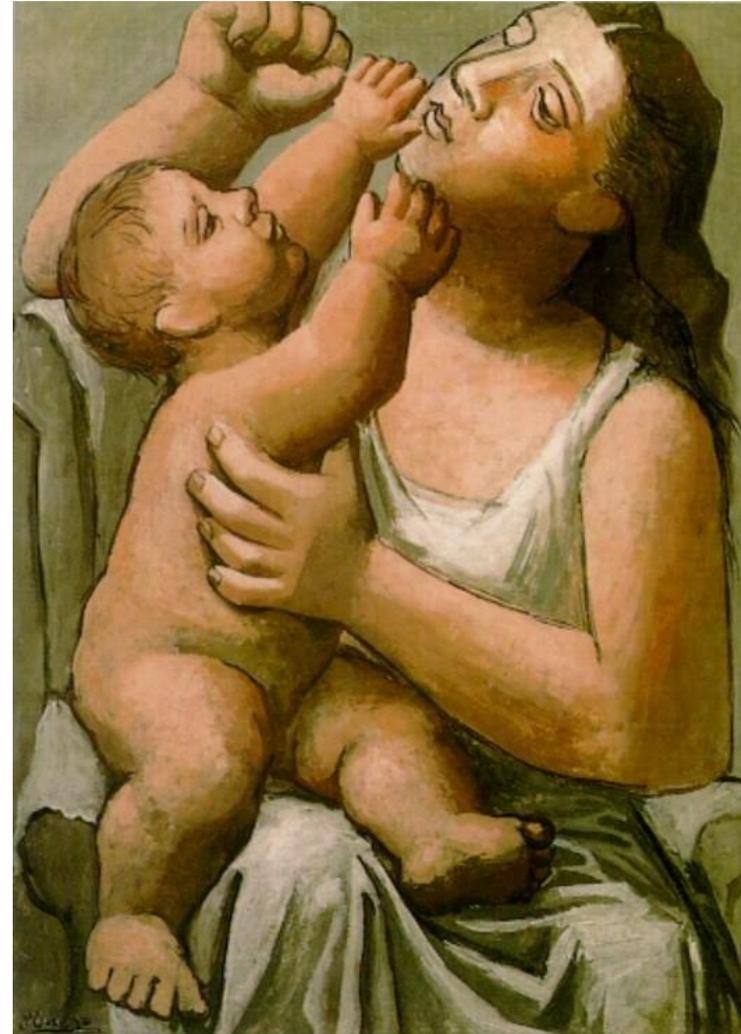
"Hopefully this trend will stop," Anthony Anderson, who has Type 2 diabetes, told PEOPLE of the life-saving drugs that have found popularity as a weight loss aide among Hollywood and TikTok

By [Lanae Brody](#) and [Glenn Garner](#) | Published on February 12, 2023 01:50 PM



# Seek Effective Primary and Primordial Prevention

- Address the complex, adaptive systems that drive obesity
- Move beyond the narrow focus on diet and exercise
- Account for social stresses and environmental obesogens
- Bring more curiosity and objectivity



*Mother and Child, painting by Pablo Picasso / WikiArt*

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# Build Systems to Deliver Better Care



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## Will Where You Live Determine Access and Coverage of Emerging Anti-Obesity Drugs?

Rakesh Singh  and Patrick Drake  
Aug 30, 2023

Bloomberg

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Opinion | Lisa Jarvis, Columnist

## Insurers Can't Avoid Covering Weight-Loss Drugs Forever

Evidence is mounting that drugs like Ozempic and Wegovy not only help patients lose weight but also help prevent heart attacks and strokes.

August 8, 2023 at 1:00 PM EDT



By **Lisa Jarvis**

Lisa Jarvis is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering biotech, health care and the pharmaceutical industry. Previously, she was executive editor of Chemical & Engineering News.

# Build Systems to Deliver Better Care



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HEALTH

## Class-action lawsuits allege healthcare companies discriminate by not covering obesity treatments

The Washington State Health Care Authority and Regence Blueshield are accused of unlawfully excluding obesity treatments like Ozempic.

Author: KING 5 Staff

Published: 1:20 PM PDT October 10, 2023

Updated: 9:00 PM PDT October 10, 2023

# We Must Close Medicare Policy Gaps in Obesity

## Medicare Part B

- Limited access to providers equipped to administer intensive behavioral therapy.
- Limited access to settings of care to receive intensive behavioral therapy

## Medicare Part D

- Statute prohibits coverage of drugs used for “weight loss” (2003)
- Needs to be updated to reflect advances in science and access to life-saving treatment

*Policy implication – Medicare coverage can have a ripple effect on coverage in both private health plans and public health programs*

# Access to Care Will Continue to Be a Struggle

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BOSTON'S MORNING NEWSLETTER

## Why Blue Cross Blue Shield is rolling back coverage of GLP-1 weight loss drugs in Massachusetts

April 18, 2025 By [Hanna Ali](#) and [Nik DeCosta-Klipa](#)

# But It Will Improve



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## TennCare Expands Coverage for Obesity Medications

August 7, 2025 by Robert Hanley

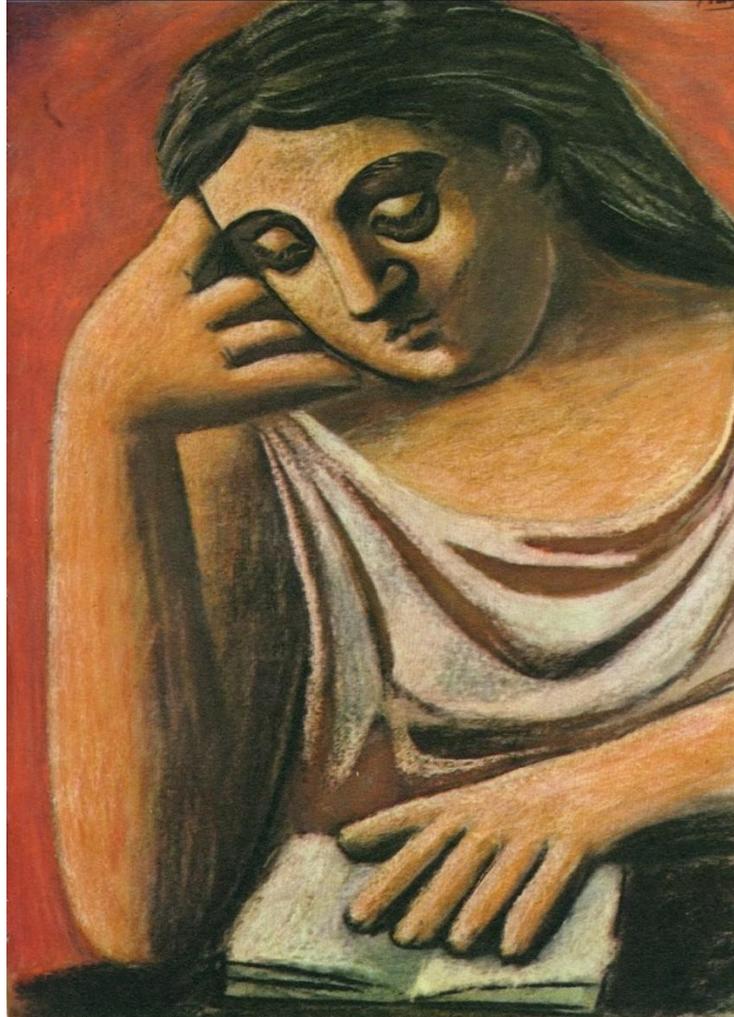
# In Sum, a Mixed Picture



Rocky Landscape, painting by August Macke / WikiArt

- Progress has accelerated in obesity care
- Prospects for secondary and tertiary prevention are bright
- Costs will decline
- Access will improve
- Expect a rocky ride

# In Sum, a Mixed Picture



Reading, painting by Pablo Picasso / WikiArt

- Primordial and primary prevention are stuck on old paradigms
- Progress will require new insights and more complete approaches

# More Information

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