

# COVID-19 and Obesity

## A special communication from the Collective for Action on Obesity – May 2020

Many organisations and experts have provided valuable information and commentary on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and our best options for the way forward in Australia. However, with increasing references in the media to a link between obesity and COVID-19, the Collective leaders felt it timely to share some additional points and highlight the relevance of our key messages, including:

- obesity stigma is prevalent, harmful and should be actively discouraged/prevented
- prevention is critical and we need to prioritise community health and wellbeing
- we need support, care and treatment options for those who are living with obesity

### The need to take care when communicating the link between obesity and COVID-19

Several studies and news articles recently have identified [emerging evidence of a health risk link](#) with obesity and COVID-19. People with obesity and chronic conditions (e.g. diabetes, heart disease, COPD) appear to have a greater risk of more severe symptoms and worse health outcomes from the COVID-19. This information should be accessible to people with obesity, supporting the opportunity for them to more proactively protect themselves and follow the Government's advice to prevent infection and should be used by health practitioners to help ensure appropriate treatment of those with COVID-19 at increased risk of serious outcomes. However, **it is important to take care with messaging around the obesity and the COVID-19 related risks**, as additional shame or frantic weight loss attempts would be counterproductive. We need to be mindful to support people with obesity and everyone who is trying to maintain their health the best they can during this difficult time. Shaming individuals who live with obesity is unfair, harmful and fails to recognise the many environmental and biological drivers of obesity.

### A risk of increasing obesity rates and health inequity arising from the pandemic

For many people, the current restrictions and economic impacts of COVID-19 may have made it more difficult to:

- be active, maintain a healthy diet and sleep well
- access and/or afford safe and healthy food due to supply chain issues and economic impacts
- receive needed support and health care services for helping manage their obesity and chronic diseases

People and communities that are already at a higher risk of obesity (e.g. Indigenous, remote/regional, many culturally and linguistically diverse and those with lower average incomes) are likely to be worse off and have greater health inequity challenges as a result of the pandemic.

### Positive developments and lessons

We have been fortunate in Australia compared to other countries, with relatively few infections, hospitalisations and deaths from COVID-19 so far. This crisis has emphasised the value of:

- our health, health system, and healthcare workers
- prevention to reduce risks and avoid harm
- opportunities to be active, and the safe, green spaces available
- access to a safe and secure supply of fresh and nutritious foods
- telehealth/virtual consultations as a complementary option to traditional services to reach more people
- the development of policies based on evidence, science and expert guidance
- a stable income
- the power of working together as communities

### High level recommendations

When we emerge from the pandemic crisis mode we need to:

- continue to prioritise community health and wellbeing and invest in healthier environments
- work collectively and reduce the health inequities that have been exacerbated by the pandemic
- provide affordable and evidence-based care and support options for people with obesity who are seeking help, learning from the current situation to develop and deliver new modalities of care

On a national level, it is important that the National Obesity and Prevention strategies are developed, implemented and invested in, under strong national leadership, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 emergency.

### Media enquiries

There are a range of obesity [prevention and treatment/care experts](#) in the Collective that would be available for further comments. If you are reporting on obesity, please be respectful and review this [one-page media guide](#).