

Obesity Management

The Reality Initiative: Help Not Hype

Reimbursement for
Obesity Treatment

Care for the Underserved Obese

Kidney Disease

Dining Out Disasters

"Some economists are now seeing that obesity is a major driver of the conditions which contribute to rising healthcare costs."

Morgan Downey, JD



"A 5-6% weight loss can result in significant savings in medical claims related to obesity."

David G. Blackburn, MALD




"Many families in poverty are challenged and are denied the very care that would save their child's life."

Caroline Apovian, MD, FACN




C.O.R.E.

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Centers for Obesity Research and Education

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Help Not Hype: Getting Real About Weight Loss

What Is the Reality Initiative?

The Reality Initiative is an expert-driven policy initiative designed to promote a realistic approach to weight loss. Specifically, the initiative strives to increase:

- Awareness of false hopes from unsubstantiated claims for weight loss products that meet no reasonable scientific standards.
- Recognition of the importance of gradual weight loss and prevention of weight gain achieved through diet, exercise, and lifestyle changes.
- Realization of the significant health benefits associated with modest weight loss.

The Reality Initiative is spearheaded by a core group of obesity and nutrition experts — the Reality Council (see Appendix A). The Council will build on the efforts of other distinguished expert groups that have recommended sustained healthy changes in food intake and increased physical activity. However, while these changes may take decades to have the maximum population-level effect, an initiative to stem false hopes created by unsubstantiated claims for weight loss products could have some immediate and important benefits for consumers. This specific endeavor — addressing the issues associated with unsubstantiated weight loss product claims — is a focus that the Reality Council feels strongly will complement efforts of other organizations and provide immediate attention and targeted action.

Specific stakeholders, including healthcare professionals, regulators, media, and corporate America have important and valuable roles to play in addressing the issues of unsubstantiated claims for weight loss products and improving the health of millions of Americans.

In this context, we have developed specific recommendations that outline opportunities for stakeholder action:

Healthcare Professionals should:

- Teach patients about realistic weight loss goals and discourage the use of weight loss products whose claims do not meet reasonable scientific standards for substantiation.

- Continue to enhance standards of practice in treating and supporting individuals with realistic weight loss goals and strategies.

Regulators should:

- Support and encourage the enforcement of existing laws and regulations impacting products that make unsubstantiated weight loss claims.

Media should:

- Communicate the consequences associated with the use of weight loss products making unsubstantiated claims.
- Invite collaboration with healthcare experts to develop and disseminate balanced messages that promote realistic weight loss strategies and discuss the health implications for people with obesity.

Corporate America should:

- Become a partner in the global efforts to educate and empower employees and consumers to make healthy decisions that support realistic weight loss strategies.
- The Reality Council hopes to engage in dialogue and forge partnerships with individuals and organizations that wish to help implement the strategies and tactics outlined in this document.



M.R.C. Greenwood, Ph.D.

Executive Summary

Obesity is a rapidly growing public health issue of primary importance in the United States. In recent years, the issues and challenges of dealing with the obesity epidemic have been clearly and thoroughly articulated by groups such as the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies of Science and the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). With two thirds of the US population considered overweight or obese, there is an urgent need to recalibrate the weight loss discussion in this country.

Appendix A: Reality Initiative Council

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Experts agree that the only safe and effective way to impact body weight and improve health is by decreasing the number of calories consumed and/or increasing the amount of exercise — maximizing the balance between energy intake and energy output. Like other public health issues, such as tobacco or alcohol abuse, there are proven products, programs, and behavior changes that are effective in reducing weight. However, unlike tobacco and alcohol, consumers cannot discontinue their use of food, so intervention strategies must support eating less, choosing healthy food options, and increasing physical activity as a new lifestyle. If we are to be successful in reversing the trend of ever-increasing obesity prevalence rates, Americans must understand that the primary concern of overweight and obesity is one of *health*, not *appearance*.¹ Obesity is a chronic disease, and successful treatment requires a lifelong effort.²

Unfortunately, consumers who are overweight or obese are often the targets of unrealistic promises for a “quick fix” of their weight problems by manufacturers of products bearing unsubstantiated weight loss claims. Product claims that cannot be supported by a sufficient science base financially exploit vulnerable individuals and create unrealistic expectations for reasonable and safe weight loss. Worse, they discourage efforts to

engage in healthy, sustainable, and proven weight loss strategies and foster a belief that quick and easy weight loss is possible. Consumers who fall prey to these false hopes may have an increasing sense of despair and hopelessness that discourage subsequent attempts at healthy lifestyle changes.

Efforts are underway to expose the marketing of unsubstantiated weight loss products — including initiatives by the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the FDA. However, in order for these efforts to be effective, consumers must understand and embrace the belief that modest changes in body weight will yield large health benefits, and that the use of weight loss products that claim effortless and rapid results will not support them in these efforts. Strategies and tactics to eliminate products that make unsubstantiated weight loss claims must be supported by health professionals, the media, regulatory agencies, and corporate entities. Such an integrated effort will empower consumers to make educated choices and help create a new reality of the work it takes to safely and effectively reach weight loss goals.

Obesity as a Public Health Issue

We are in the midst of a global epidemic of obesity. More than 1 billion adults worldwide — in both industrialized societies and developing countries — are overweight, and at least 300 million qualify as clinically obese (see Appendix B for weight classifications).³ Unfortunately, the United States is the global leader in this epidemic, with the highest prevalence of obesity among developed nations.⁴ According to 2004 data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), two out of every three American adults (66.3%) are overweight, and about half of that group — 32.2% of adults — have obesity.⁵ The obesity epidemic is not limited to adults, however. Nearly one in five children and adolescents in the United States (17.1%) are overweight, and an additional 16.5% are at risk of becoming overweight.⁵

Although many Americans view overweight as a body image issue, the real concern is the extent to which overweight and obesity contribute directly to morbidity and mortality.⁶ A growing body of scientific evidence links an excess of adipose tissue with inflammation and the production of a hormonal environment which can clearly contribute to the diseases we associate with obesity. In other words, once established, overweight and obesity fit the established model of disease we use for other chronic diseases.^{7, 8}

Overweight and obesity are known risk factors for:

- Coronary heart disease
- Diabetes (type 2)

