



## Debate continues over 'disease' label

**I'm not sure what to make of the fact that so many people are now calling obesity a "disease." What's the point? Isn't it a cop-out?**

When the American Medical Association officially recognized obesity as a disease last June, the move was controversial.

But the idea behind classifying obesity as a disease rather than a "disorder" or "condition" has some merit: Health officials hoped it would encourage doctors to take more ownership in helping patients with weight-loss efforts and encourage more discussion about weight.

Still, in adopting the measure, the AMA essentially declared one-third of Americans as "sick" simply because of their weight, even if they don't have any health problems. For that and other reasons, some health authorities continue to dispute the label.

Recently, new research has entered the fray. The study, published online in January in *Psychological Science*, involved more than 700 people. Researchers found that participants who read an article labeling obesity as a disease tended to have a higher body image and reduced stigma about obesity. On the other hand, they also seemed less concerned about weight and saw eating healthfully as less important.

Experts are split on whether people have total control over their weight. Some point to evidence that hormones and other factors play a

significant role in a person's appetite and weight -- circumstances that go beyond eating too many calories and not getting enough physical activity. In addition, people wrestling with obesity often struggle with self-esteem issues, which present another roadblock in the battle of the bulge. Previous research has shown that having a healthy body image is extremely important to overall well-being and is associated with other health factors, including increased physical activity and reduced stress.

The bottom line? Maybe it's not important whether obesity is a disease or not. If you're battling a weight problem, it could be more advantageous to focus on overcoming any discomfort with the issue and having an upfront, honest discussion about your weight with your doctor or other health professional.

But don't stop there. Self-esteem, stress reduction, physical activity and healthy eating all contribute greatly to overall health and well-being, and they're all things you can make small but sustainable progress in. It's important to also talk about these things with your doctor, as well as any medical or counseling options that may be helpful.

*Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University's College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1043, or filipic.3@osu.edu.*



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### Editor:

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