What is weight loss surgery?

Weight loss surgery is a procedure that helps some people lose weight. The surgery by itself will not lead to successful weight loss in the long term. It MUST be combined with healthy eating patterns, regular physical activity, and a healthy lifestyle. The operation helps with weight loss by restricting food intake and, in some operations, interrupting the digestive process.

Who might consider the surgery?

The surgery is an option for people who are severely obese and cannot lose weight by traditional means, such as diet and exercise alone. It may also be an option for those who are obese and suffer from serious obesity-related health problems. If your BMI (body mass index) is greater than 40, or is between 35 and 40, and you have significant reversible weight-related health conditions, you may be a candidate for weight loss surgery.

How much weight can I expect to lose with surgery?

Right after surgery, most patients lose weight quickly and continue to lose it for 18 to 24 months. On average patients lose about two-thirds of their EXCESS body weight, although some of this weight may be regained later. Long-term weight loss depends on your commitment to regular exercise and healthy eating habits.

What are the benefits of weight loss surgery?

Weight loss can make it easier to live a full and active life. Health issues associated with excess weight (such as high blood pressure, diabetes, sleep apnea, and high cholesterol) often improve. Unfortunately, some of these health conditions may reappear 5 or more years after surgery, even when the weight loss is maintained. More research is needed to better understand why these conditions recur for some surgery patients.

What lifestyle changes should be made before and after surgery?

Starting healthy habits, like getting regular physical activity and making nutritious food choices, before surgery will help prepare you for surgery and for success after surgery. Weight loss prior to surgery is recommended for improving health outcomes.

Stop smoking. If you smoke, you will need to quit smoking before surgery. Surgery will not be offered to anyone who is an active smoker. This is because smoking after surgery can cause serious complications, including death.

A physical activity routine should be in place before surgery. Physical activity jump-starts the weight loss process and can help speed up your healing after surgery. Weight loss from this surgery cannot be maintained without regular exercise. Aim to get at least 30 minutes of exercise every day doing something you enjoy.

Healthy eating means paying attention to the types of food you eat, as well as the amount of food you eat. Surgery changes the way you digest and absorb food. This means you’ll need to be very aware of eating the right kinds of foods, avoiding certain foods and beverages, and carefully planning when you eat. You’ll also have to take vitamin and mineral supplements every day for the rest of your life to be sure you get the nutrients you need.

Healthy living before and after surgery also includes managing your stress and avoiding drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. If you eat when under stress, it is important to find another way to handle your stress (such as deep breathing, meditation, or exercise). These healthy habits will help with recovery and will promote long-term weight loss.
What are the potential side effects or risks of weight loss surgery?

In general, weight loss surgery is safe and effective. As with any surgery, there is a risk of bleeding, infection, or heart and lung trouble. Other potential side effects from this surgery include digestive symptoms like ulcers, gas, bloating, diarrhea, or nausea. If you are a candidate for surgery, the surgeons will discuss the potential risks with you in detail.

If you lose a lot of weight rapidly, you may develop loose folds of skin in the abdomen or other areas of your body. Surgery to remove excess skin may be cosmetic or reconstructive (medically indicated). If your provider determines that the surgery is not medically indicated, then it is not a covered benefit and you will need to pay for the cost of the cosmetic surgery. Medically indicated treatment means treatment that is recommended in the professional judgment of a physician after consideration of relevant medical standards.

How can I learn more about the surgery?

Many Kaiser Permanente facilities offer Weight Loss Surgery Introductory Seminars. We highly recommend you attend the seminar before seeking referral to a surgery center for consultation. At the seminar, you will learn about:

- The procedures offered.
- How the surgery will impact your body and your lifestyle.
- The life-long physical activity and dietary changes that you’ll need to make.
- How to start making the necessary lifestyle changes and how to stick with them over the long term.

Contact your local Health Education Center for more information about the seminar.

What next?

If you’re considering weight loss surgery, you’ll want to seriously think about the range of emotional, physical, mental, and nutritional challenges that come with this life-altering method of weight loss. Talk with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns.

If you attend the Introductory Seminar and decide you’d like to pursue weight loss surgery, contact your doctor. If he or she believes that weight loss surgery is an option for you, you will be referred to a surgery center for consultation. The surgery team will make the final determination if surgery is a safe option for you.

The surgery is offered at Kaiser Permanente locations in Fremont, Fresno, Richmond, South Sacramento, and South San Francisco. You will need to make arrangements to travel to one of these locations several times before and after surgery.

The surgery process and timeline will vary based on your individual needs, including:

- Your current health status. Some health concerns, like diabetes or high blood pressure, may need to be improved before proceeding with surgery.
- Your psychological and emotional readiness for the surgery. Surgery candidates with eating disorders, depression, anxiety, or addiction problems may need to delay surgery until the conditions are properly treated and under control.
- Your ability to start making changes in your eating and physical activity habits before the surgery.

Other resources

- Visit kp.org/healthyweight.
- Kaiser Permanente Wellness Coaching provides personalized support to help you make lifestyle changes. Call our toll-free number, (866) 251-4514, or visit kp.org/mydoctor/wellnesscoaching.
- Visit your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.
- Weight-Control Information Network (niddk.nih.gov/health/nutrit/win.htm).
- American Society of Metabolic and Bariatric Surgeons (asmbs.org).

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. Some photos may include models and not actual patients.