

Weight Loss Surgery

Frequently Asked questions

What is weight loss surgery?

Weight loss surgery is a drastic tool for losing weight, which is only effective with a commitment to a life-long nutrition plan and physical activity routine. Surgery is an option for people who are severely obese and cannot lose weight by traditional means or who suffer from serious obesity-related health problems. The operation promotes weight loss by restricting food intake and, in some operations, interrupting the digestive process.

Surgery is for people with severe obesity—a chronic condition determined by a body mass index (BMI) of 40 or greater. Your Kaiser Permanente provider can help you calculate your BMI, which is based on your height and weight. You can find a BMI calculator on kp.org/healthyliving.

Keep in mind that surgery alone will not result in sustained weight loss. Successful and long-term weight loss is possible only when combined with healthy eating patterns, regular physical activity, and adopting a healthy lifestyle.

How much weight can I expect to lose with surgery?

Right after surgery, most patients lose weight quickly and continue to lose for 18 to 24 months. Most patients lose about two-thirds of their excess body weight although some of this weight may be regained later. As with other treatments for obesity, long-term weight loss success depends on your ability to adopt lifestyle changes like regular exercise and healthy eating habits.

What are the benefits of weight loss surgery?

Health issues associated with excess weight (such as high blood pressure, diabetes, sleep apnea, and high cholesterol) often improve with significant weight loss. The extent of improvement depends on the severity of the medical condition prior to surgery. Unfortunately, some of these health conditions may reappear five or more years after surgery, even when you maintain the weight loss. More research is needed to better understand why this may be the case for some surgery patients.

What are the potential side effects or risks of the surgery?

As with any surgery, you may be at risk for bleeding, infection, or heart and lung trouble. Sometimes the spleen can be injured during the surgery and must be removed. Very rarely, in less than one percent of all surgery cases, death may occur. Below is a list of potential surgical complications.

- leakage at the site where tissues from the stomach and intestines are sewn or stapled together
- infections of surgical wound or incision
- infection of the abdominal cavity (peritonitis)
- change in the ability to digest a sugar in milk products called lactose
- nausea, bloating, diarrhea (also known as “dumping syndrome”)
- excessive loss of water from the body (dehydration)
- blood clots in legs or lungs
- changes in taste and smell
- gallstones (tiny stones that form in the gallbladder)
- painful build-up of uric acid in the big toe, ankle, knee, wrist, or elbow (gout)
- abdominal adhesions
- nutritional deficiencies (calcium, iron, vitamin B12)
- hair thinning

If you lose a lot of weight rapidly, your skin often becomes very saggy or you may develop large skin folds in the abdomen or other areas of your body. You may choose to have plastic surgery to remove the skin folds. You can consult plastic surgeons in Kaiser Permanente or your community about this elective procedure. This is not a Kaiser Permanente covered benefit.

What lifestyle changes should be made before and after surgery?

Healthy habits, like regular physical activity and nutritious food choices, help prepare you for surgery and for success after surgery. Weight loss prior to surgery is recommended for improving health outcomes.

A physical activity routine should be in place prior to surgery. Physical activity jump starts the weight loss process and can help with healing more quickly, too. Weight loss is not maintained without regular exercise.

Healthy eating includes the type of foods 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. Below are some examples of the guidelines you will need to follow before and after surgery:

- Avoid simple sugars, such as juices or candies.
- Avoid high fat foods and fast foods.
- Avoid carbonated and alcoholic beverages.
- Avoid eating tough, fibrous foods, like popcorn, seeds, corn, and the skin and seeds of fruits and vegetables.
- Chew food thoroughly (30 times per bite) at all meals.
- Take multivitamin and mineral supplements daily.
- Drink fluids only between meals, not with meals.

Healthy living before and after surgery also includes managing your stress and avoiding drugs, alcohol, and tobacco. These healthy habits will help with recovery, as well as long-term weight loss. Surgery is not done on active smokers.

How do I learn more about weight loss surgery and better understand the lifestyle changes necessary for success?

Many Kaiser Permanente facilities offer informational seminars on weight loss surgery. Check with your Health Education Center for more information. You can learn more about:

- the procedure and how the surgery changes the way you digest and absorb food
- how much weight loss to expect
- the possible risks or side effects of the surgery
- the life-long physical activity and dietary changes that you'll need to make before and after the surgery
- how to make lifestyle changes that will improve your weight loss outcomes.

What next?

There is a lot to consider when thinking about 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. To discuss weight loss options, including surgery, make an appointment with your physician. If your physician agrees that weight loss surgery is a reasonable treatment option for you, he or she can make a referral to a surgeon.

Surgeons at Kaiser Permanente locations in Fremont, Fresno, Richmond, and South San Francisco do weight loss surgeries. You will need to make arrangements to travel to the surgery site (and perhaps take time off from work and other family obligations) to meet with the surgical team several times before and after surgery.

Because each person has different needs, the preparation and timeframe for surgery will vary to meet individual needs. This will be reviewed during surgery consultations and much will depend on the following:

- Your current health status. Individuals with uncontrolled conditions, such as diabetes or high blood pressure, are at higher risk for surgery complications. Your health status before surgery could interfere with how quickly you heal after surgery. Once you achieve better control of these conditions, you can usually proceed to surgery.
- Your psychological and emotional readiness for the surgery. Surgery candidates with eating disorders, depression, or anxiety may need to delay surgery until the conditions are properly treated and under control.
- Your demonstrated ability to adopt the suggested nutrition and physical activity lifestyle guidelines. Remember, you will need to live with these changes for the rest of your life.



Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at **kp.org/healthyliving** where you'll find the Health Encyclopedia, a Weight Management Featured Health Topic of detailed information, a BMI calculator, online weight loss, nutrition and stress management programs, discounts to services including Weight Watchers®, a list of health education classes in your area, and much more.
- American Society for Bariatric Surgery
asbs.org.
- Weight-Control Information Network
niddk.nih.gov/health/nutrit/win.htm
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- With a *Kaiser Permanente Healthphone Directory*, you can pick messages to hear on Kaiser Permanente Healthphone (1-800-332-7563; TTY: 1-800-777-9059). Request a *Directory* from your Health Education Center or Department or download a copy at **members.kp.org**. (Search "Healthphone".)
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for books, videos, and classes. All classes are open to Kaiser Permanente members and their families; some are open to nonmembers. Many classes are available at no cost; some have a fee. Some classes are not available in all areas.

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 health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.