

POSITIVE  
WEIGHT-RELATED  
COMMUNICATIONS  
TOOLKIT

# Population-Based Messaging to Foster Weight-Positive Communications

In partnership with  
**Québec** 

 **ASPQ**  
ASSOCIATION POUR LA SANTÉ  
PUBLIQUE DU QUÉBEC

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## Preamble

Weight-related issues, including excessive preoccupation with weight, obesity and fatphobia, are cross-cutting public health issues involving many stakeholders in all spheres of society. Understanding them requires a multipronged approach mobilizing human, social and biomedical sciences, among other fields, as well as experiential knowledge.

While these issues have been a topic of discussion in Quebec for several decades, the ongoing evolution of scientific knowledge, values, and social context has complexified our understanding of weight-related messaging, by highlighting biases and raising issues, such as weight stigma. Thus, it is believed that certain health messages perpetuate the thin ideal and fuel fatphobia.

Being unidirectional, communications aimed at the general public should be clear and simple, to be effective and understood.

The following messages are designed to deconstruct prejudices and raise awareness about weight-related issues, in a respectful and non-stigmatizing manner.

These proposed population-based messages are the result of a consensus between various health and social science experts and organizations. They were also revised, to take into consideration different target audiences and their vulnerabilities to weight-related discourses.

# Fatphobia

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**What is  
fatphobia?**

**Fatphobia** refers to stereotypes, prejudices, and negative behaviours that belittle or exclude fat people\*.



\* The term "fat" is used here in a neutral way to describe a person's body size

## How does fatphobia manifests itself in society?

- **Weight-related prejudices** exist in many forms. For example, it is often mistakenly believed that people are fat due to a lack of willpower, because they eat too much or badly, or they lack physical activity.
  - In opposite to false beliefs fuelled by fatphobic prejudices, half of Quebec's population, regardless of weight, is considered to not be active enough<sup>1</sup> and to not eat enough fruits and vegetables<sup>2</sup>.
  - In reality, a person's weight is influenced by several factors beyond their control, such as genetics<sup>3</sup>, living environments (neighbourhood, work environment, etc.)<sup>4</sup> and medication<sup>5</sup>.
- **On television, in movies, and even in children's shows**, fat people are often portrayed as being mean, greedy or unintelligent, in addition to being frequently mocked at.
  - These demeaning representations reinforce stereotypes and negative behaviours towards fat people, in addition to influencing the judgment we pass on our own body.<sup>6</sup>
- **During the hiring process**, a person's weight can be a factor of discrimination.<sup>7</sup>
- **In the workplace**, equipment, furniture and workspaces are not always accessible and ergonomic for fat people.<sup>8</sup>
- **At school**, weight is one of the main sources of bullying.<sup>9</sup>
- **In the medical context**, healthcare staff sometimes provide poor quality care to overweight people<sup>10</sup> and tend to wrongfully attribute all their health problems to their weight<sup>11</sup>.
  - Also, medical equipment is not always suitable for all sizes. Blood pressure cuffs, hospital gowns or chairs with armrests are often too small for fat people<sup>12</sup>.

## What are the consequences of fatphobia?

Fatphobia has many **negative impacts** on **social relationships**, as well as **physical and mental health**<sup>13, 14</sup>:

- Depression and anxiety;
- Deterioration of lifestyle habits;
- Social exclusion and isolation;
- Unhealthy relationship with food;
- Increased mortality;
- Chronic stress;
- Repeated attempts to lose weight through possibly unsafe methods;
- Eating behaviour disorders.

**Fatphobic prejudices and stereotypes** conveyed in society have a **negative influence on body image and self-esteem**; for example, by feeding a **constant fear of gaining weight**.<sup>15</sup>

## What can we do to reduce fatphobia?

We can break weight-related prejudices and stereotypes, and promote inclusion by:

- Raising public awareness about the manifestations and consequences of fatphobia;
- Embracing body diversity;
- Rejecting myths and false beliefs around weight and health.
  - A large body is not necessarily an indicator of poor health. Health is complex and weight gain alone is not an indicator of health<sup>16</sup>.

It is also essential to **build weight-inclusive living environments** and to equip decision-makers, employers, healthcare personnel, and those who work with children with the tools they need to do so:

- **At school:** by giving all students, regardless of their weight, the same opportunities to participate in school life;
- **At work:** by building ergonomic workspaces for all sizes and builds;
- **In medical environments:** by providing appropriate, respectful, and quality care for everyone;
- **In all other living environments:** by providing sports equipment and urban infrastructures adapted to all body types.

In the end, we all have the capacity to become aware of and question the weight-related prejudices that influence and surround us.

- As an individual, we can inform ourselves and learn how to recognize fatphobic prejudices;
- As a decision-maker, we can ensure that the living environments under our responsibility are inclusive and respectful of fat people (e.g., ergonomic office chairs, health interventions that do not target only weight, anti-discrimination policies that recognize fatphobia, etc.).

# Obesity

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## What is obesity and why is it a public health issue?

Obesity is a particularly complex issue, whose biological, social, psychological and environmental dimensions must all be taken into consideration.

For a long time, obesity was defined solely by a person's weight, in relation to their height (the body mass index [BMI]).

→ A growing number of experts now consider that health risks depend on the distribution of fat in the body, more so than the number on the scale.<sup>17</sup>

**At the population level**, obesity is associated with a higher risk of developing health problems, such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and certain cancers.<sup>18</sup>

→ For some people, the accumulation of fat in the body can affect the quality of life, which requires help from health professionals, such as kinesiologists or nutritionists, for example.

**At the individual level**, a person's health cannot be measured by weight and BMI alone.

→ Being fat does not necessarily mean a person is in poor health. Conversely, being thin does not necessarily mean a person is healthy.



## What are the causes of obesity?

Obesity is complex.

- All bodies work differently and we don't really have control over everything that happens in it. Indeed, the way our body stores and distributes fat can have a significant impact on our health, regardless of weight.<sup>19, 20</sup>
- Eating habits and physical activity are not the only factors that influence the accumulation and distribution of fat. For example, genetics, ethnicity, medication use, stress, and living environments are equally important factors.<sup>21</sup>

## What communication channels should be favoured to address obesity?

Eating well, having an active lifestyle, sleeping well, thriving at school or at work, and having positive social relationships are positive health factors, regardless of weight.

Living environments in particular have a significant influence on a person's health, habits and lifestyle, regardless of their weight.

- Think of the way neighbourhoods are laid out, the presence of fast-food restaurants near schools, physical and economic access to fresh fruits and vegetables, family dynamics, the types of jobs available, the schools and daycares that welcome children, the community and sense of belonging, etc.

Decision-makers must facilitate the adoption of lifestyle habits conducive to health and well-being.

- For example, by creating opportunities to stay active, eat healthy, enjoy peaceful moments in our different living environments (in the neighbourhood, at school, etc.).
- For example, by creating parks, by dedicating streets to free play, by offering healthy food in municipal infrastructures, by implementing well-being policies in the workplace, etc.

# Lifestyle Habits Conducive to Well-Being and Health

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## What do we mean by “lifestyle habits conducive to well-being and health”?

They can be defined as **everyday actions** that have a **positive influence on health**, whether physical, mental or social.

- Healthy lifestyle habits are not just about food and physical activity, but also concern stress and sleep management, screen time, and the quality of our social relationships.
- Healthy lifestyle habits significantly reduce the risk of various chronic diseases, strengthen our immune system, and promote mental health.<sup>22, 23</sup>

## What are the benefits of adopting healthy lifestyle habits?

Everyone benefits from adopting lifestyle habits conducive to well-being and health, **regardless of their weight**.

The benefits that come from adopting healthier eating habits or a more active lifestyle go beyond numbers on the scale. They include increased energy, greater focus, and being able to perform different activities, regardless of weight and body type.

Adopting healthy lifestyle habits (e.g., healthy eating, physically active lifestyle, balanced use of screens, tobacco-free lifestyle, sufficient sleep, etc.) may not necessarily have an impact on a person's weight, which is completely normal. **The benefits surpass mere numbers on the scale.**

- By focusing on the immediate benefits granted by these lifestyle habits, such as improved concentration and a sense of accomplishment, there is a better chance of maintaining them over time.

Physical activity in all its forms is beneficial for both mind and body.

- Walking around the neighbourhood, gardening, cleaning and playing outside are all ways to maintain a daily active lifestyle!
- Being active helps manage stress, sleep better, meet people, and reduce the risks associated with chronic diseases, among other things.



## Where to start if you want to adopt healthy lifestyle habits?

Rather than aiming for perfection, starting with simple, small steps towards better lifestyle habits will produce immediate health benefits. Here are a few examples:

- Cooking regularly is a good way to discover new flavours and improve cooking skills.
- Gradually adopting the **Health Canada's Food Guide's** recommendations will bring effective changes towards a healthier diet.
- Walking every day allows you to experience the soothing benefits of spending time outdoors, in addition to improving concentration at work.
- Practising sports in a group strengthens social ties and the feeling of belonging to an active community.
- Getting a good night's sleep improves your mood.
- Spending quality time with people you love can help you manage your stress.

By focusing on the pleasure and the benefits gained by adopting healthy lifestyle habits, rather than the prospect of losing weight, there is a better chance of maintaining them over time.

Living environments must make it easy for everyone to adopt lifestyles that are conducive to well-being and health.

- Consequently, efforts must be made to promote physical and economic access to nutritious and fresh food, opportunities to walk around neighbourhoods and go to school in complete safety, access to healthy housing, green spaces, and respectful communities for all.
- Regardless of weight, our living environments should allow us to achieve a state of physical, mental and social well-being.

# Preoccupation With Weight

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## Why are people preoccupied with their weight?

Current social norms wrongly associate thinness with health, success and beauty. This leads many people to becoming preoccupied with weight. However, the thin ideal is unattainable for most people.

→ Although the social standard of thinness leads us to pursue a single body type, nature created us differently. It is important to value these differences.

There are also medical and social pressures that maintain the myth that health rhymes with thinness.

## What are the consequences of increased preoccupation with weight?

Wanting to reach an unattainable ideal of thinness can cause suffering.

→ Some people end up internalizing fatphobic prejudices and stereotypes.

In some cases, preoccupation with weight can be detrimental to physical or mental health.

→ This can lead some people to seek unsafe and unhealthy weight-loss products, services and methods.

→ For example, some people exercise excessively for the sole purpose of controlling their weight or undertake restrictive diets.

Individuals have limited control over their weight.

→ The weight-loss industry promotes the idea that it is possible to lose weight quickly and effortlessly, which they use to promote methods whose effectiveness for weight loss is generally not demonstrated.

→ Diet culture leads us to believe that it is easy to lose weight, but in reality, most people regain the lost weight, once they stop dieting.

→ The use of weight-loss products, services and methods sometimes leads to a yo-yo effect, which has a negative impact on health.

Drastic weight-loss methods can be dangerous to physical and mental health.

## What should we do about this phenomenon of preoccupation with weight?

Bodies come in all shapes and sizes and this diversity is a source of wealth. Since we have no control over most of our physical characteristics, including the colour of our eyes, the length of our legs, our curves or the size of our ears, it is best to learn to accept one's body as it is.

→ Being more tolerant of one's own body and developing a healthy and positive body image also means adopting lifestyle habits that bring us benefits on a daily basis.



# Messaging Related to Children

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## Should we be worried about children being fat??

For some children, excess body fat can have a negative impact on their quality of life, which may require support from health professionals, such as pediatricians, kinesiologists and nutritionists.

In Quebec, experts have noted a decrease in the physical capacities of children and adolescents, **regardless of their weight**, which has repercussions on their cardiometabolic health.<sup>24</sup> Premature risks of cardiovascular and metabolic diseases increase inequalities, greatly alter the physical and mental health of young people, and can have lifelong consequences.

- Lifestyle habits and living environments have the largest influence on health and well-being.
- It is important to provide children with living environments in which they can, among other things, eat healthy foods, be active on a daily basis, develop their motor skills, and develop healthy relationships. This prevents many health risks.

As children grow into adolescence, their bodies develop and change.

- At this stage of development, children may sometimes develop an excessive preoccupation with weight or experience fatphobia.
- Our words and actions can lead them to develop an unhealthy relationship with their body image, food or physical activity. This can have devastating effects on their self-esteem and even lead to risky or unhealthy behaviours.

As adults, we have a duty to encourage and empower children to appreciate their body as it is, by:

- Recognizing what their body can accomplish, rather than relying solely on the image it projects;
- Valuing body diversity in their daily lives;
- Respecting different body types.

It is especially important to avoid depriving children of different foods due to weight-related concerns, or forcing them to do physical activities that they do not like.

- While we may think we are doing a good thing, this can contribute to increasing the appeal of less nutritious foods, developing eating disorders, and losing interest in physical activity.

## What can parents do if they are worried?

The best thing to do, if you are worried about your child's health, is to consult a health professional (e.g., family doctor, psychologist, pediatrician, etc.).

As a parent, you can implement some of the following strategies to encourage the adoption of healthy lifestyle habits:

- Would you like your children to eat more nutritious foods like fruits and vegetables? Involving children in food preparation is a proven way to capture their interest and develop their taste for healthy foods, while also introducing them to new foods and developing their cooking skills. Plus, it's a great opportunity to spend time together as a family!
- It is recommended that children do at least one hour of physical activity per day. It doesn't have to be a specific sport; it can be a physical activity that your child enjoys and feels good about.
  - Some children prefer group activities and others individual activities. Some want to be supervised and directed in their activity and others simply want to play actively without specific supervision. What matters is creating family opportunities to be active!
  - For example, playing a sport in the yard or at the park, walking around the neighbourhood, participating in an active online course, hiking, going to a public or private swimming pool—these are all great options that can be integrated into your routine.

In order to help children flourish and maintain positive mental health, it is important to value them for qualities unrelated to their appearance (by highlighting their personality traits, strengths, talents, achievements, etc.), to educate them about diversity and the importance of being aligned and connected to oneself, and to establish harmonious relationships within the family.

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