

WA HEALTHY WEIGHT ACTION PLAN 2019-2024



HEALTH CONSUMERS'
COUNCIL

CONSUMER INSIGHTS

ABORIGINAL PEOPLE



Contents

Background	3
Who we spoke to	3
Personal experiences with weight	3
Who would you talk to about weight?	4
Weight and food	4
Weight and physical activity	5
Stigma, wellbeing and holistic care.....	5
About.....	6
Health Consumers' Council	6
Heathy Weight Action Plan	6
Resources	6

Background

We would like to thank and pay our respects to the Elders and Aboriginal consumers who shared their stories with us so generously. We acknowledge that the topic of weight can be a very difficult thing for people impacted by weight stigma to discuss, and we work to ensure these stories are treated respectfully and used for the improvement of health services to Aboriginal people.

In this document, we have summarised some of the points that came out of these discussions.

Who we spoke to

In August 2021 we sought insights from several Aboriginal consumers around weight and weight issues. We spoke to 12 people; 6 in a group, 1 over the telephone and 5 in person interviews.

We asked consumers several questions around who they would go to for advice around weight, what works for them and what they have seen work for their family and community, and what doesn't.

When we asked people to tell us about themselves, people shared that they were Grandparents caring for their little grandchildren, that they were retired health professionals, parents, husbands, and wives and carers of their partners and family members. Overwhelmingly people describe being connected to family and community, to being very conscious of the health disparities faced by themselves, their families, and other Aboriginal people, and wanting better health and wellbeing for their children and grandchildren.

Personal experiences with weight

When we asked if weight was an issue for them, most said it was or had been. While we didn't ask specifically about people's medical conditions, many reported chronic disease including Type 2 Diabetes, COPD, and mental health issues. The medical issues people spoke around included:

- Type 2 Diabetes since I was 14 (male adult early 20's)
- Put on weight during pregnancy and developed pre-eclampsia
- Put on 30kgs when quit smoking and was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes
- Has COPD and asthma
- Experienced a lot of traumas over her life including mental health, sexual assault, and homelessness
- Has PCOS and fears infertility as a result
- Both husband and wife have Type 2 diabetes
- Blood pressure issues and both types of diabetes
- Heart blockages
- Heart attacks

When we spoke about non-medical issues that people felt was related to their weight, the in-person group participants spoke generously and openly around weight stigma and the effect that has on them and their lives. These conversations included these comments:

- Not just the way others treat them, but the way they treat themselves or think about themselves. "I'm not happy in myself." "Why bother because every time I try to lose weight it goes back on." "I feel like I should be able to lose weight."
- Shopping for clothes and how it can be a really bad experience, "you shouldn't feel like oh God I hope it'll fit" and then if something does fit just buying it because it's good enough
- Bra shopping is horrible

- “I don’t go out.” If a friend asks her out for coffee she says no
- Spoke about having a supportive partner – “he touches my fat and I’m like no it’s yuck. But he makes me feel less bad about myself.”
- “The looks I get in a small town. The disgust. For being overweight, not the prettiest and with an Aboriginal family.”
- “You can’t be fat nowadays.”

Who would you talk to about weight?

When we asked participants who they might go to if they wanted to talk about weight or get any advice about managing their weight, we received similar responses. People did talk about the experience of speaking to their GP. Some people said the GP just weighed them and didn’t offer any further help or advice. One participant said the GP just spoke in medical terms whereas the participant felt the weight was more a community health issue.

Most comments around GPs were that people didn’t feel the GP would be able to help them with weight issues. Many saw regular GPs for other chronic disease management and reported positive experiences.

When we asked people about who they did go to for advice or for support and information, the responses included friends and family. Other people said they wouldn’t go anywhere. One participant suggested that people could go to the Aboriginal Medical Service. One participant also said that going online for information was helpful and common.

One of the topics we yarned about was what people thought might work for them or their family and community when it came to managing healthy weight. Some participants mentioned a health crisis such as a heart attack was the catalyst to adopting a healthier lifestyle and sometimes, losing weight. Having regular contact with their GP to manage their chronic disease was also helpful for some participants. A couple of participants spoke about having regular physiotherapy and dietetics support to understand portion control and healthy food choices. People spoke about having healthy lifestyle, wellbeing, nutrition, and exercise programs run at community centres would be helpful. A telephone interviewee said that taking the clinical part out and just yarning would be helpful. She suggested that the focus needs to be on health and wellbeing, not weight. People also spoke about needing different approaches for different people, and that the reasons someone is overweight might be different for each person.

Weight and food

A topic that came up regularly was around healthy food, fast food and the difficulties for families and people relying on food hampers. Grandparents caring for their grandchildren spoke of the difficulty in denying fast food and take away to them. Participants also spoke about the food choices open to people accessing food hampers. The hampers are often full of foods that people are trying to avoid as they are often high in salt, carbs and sugars. They spoke of many people with Type 2 diabetes that need this food support, but the choice is often between eating and health. There was also discussion around the need for knowledge in healthy cooking, portion sizes and food budgeting. One participant spoke of being able to access as much traditional food including kangaroo. When it is available, she enjoys it and it is a much healthier option. Another participant spoke of sharing food with family, “everyone chucks in, everyone shares. I made damper. Some people will buy fast food, but someone will buy something healthy, so people have a choice.”

Weight and physical activity

People also spoke about physical activity and the correlation they felt between being active and being healthy. People spoke about the need for community centres to host exercise groups, so people could attend and not feel shame. One participant spoke about not wanting to be taught about weight and healthy by skinny people. They also spoke about walking and grandchildren keeping them active and moving. Some participants spoke about lifestyle programs that don't seem to go on for very long, and when they finish people are left without this support. Some people talked about going to the gym but it being expensive, and they close during lockdowns. Someone else spoke about being able to access an exercise physiologist through community health.

Stigma, wellbeing and holistic care

We found that people are very open to talk about their weight journey and experiences. People expressed the wish that doctors and clinicians would be sensitive about the issue, and that if it is raised that it is related to health and wellbeing, not just numbers. Several participants spoke about their shame and discomfort with the word obese/obesity being used. They wanted a more positive approach, for doctors to ask how they were going generally.

All groups that we spoke to wanted services more centred in the community centres they attended so that they could access them in that supportive environment. They wanted classes and programs that were ongoing, with visiting health services that continued to come out to talk to them. They spoke very clearly about the need for health to be viewed and treated holistically, without judgement and shame.

About

Health Consumers' Council

Health Consumers' Council (WA) Inc. is an independent, not for profit organisation established in 1994 with the purpose of giving a voice to health consumers in Western Australia and improving health outcomes by encouraging and supporting consumer engagement and involvement in health services.

Healthy Weight Action Plan

The [WA Healthy Weight Action Plan 2019-2024](#) is a joint initiative of WA Health, WA Primary Health Alliance, and Health Consumers' Council to create a roadmap for sustainable changes to support people and families who are at-risk of overweight and those with overweight and obesity. It is the first step of many to create a coordinated approach across health to tackle the complex causes of overweight and obesity and work with our partners across WA to drive long-term change.

Resources

[WA Healthy Weight Action Plan 2019-2024](#)

[Partners in Change – Healthy Weight](#)

[Shift. A guide for media and communication professionals](#)

[The Personal Cost of Weight Issues in Australia 2020](#)

WA HEALTHY WEIGHT ACTION PLAN 2019-2024

Health Consumers' Council received funding from the WA Department of Health to connect and involve people impacted by overweight and obesity.

We have a number of documents available for people working within WA health services to contribute to improving health services in this area.

* Please note these insights are not exhaustive and in some cases come from small numbers of people. We share these in the hope that they add value to the evidence-based information on this topic.

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