

# How to Support Someone Having Bariatric Surgery

## Information for family and friends

When someone you care about is going to have weight-loss surgery, you may have many questions.

Read this handout to learn about:

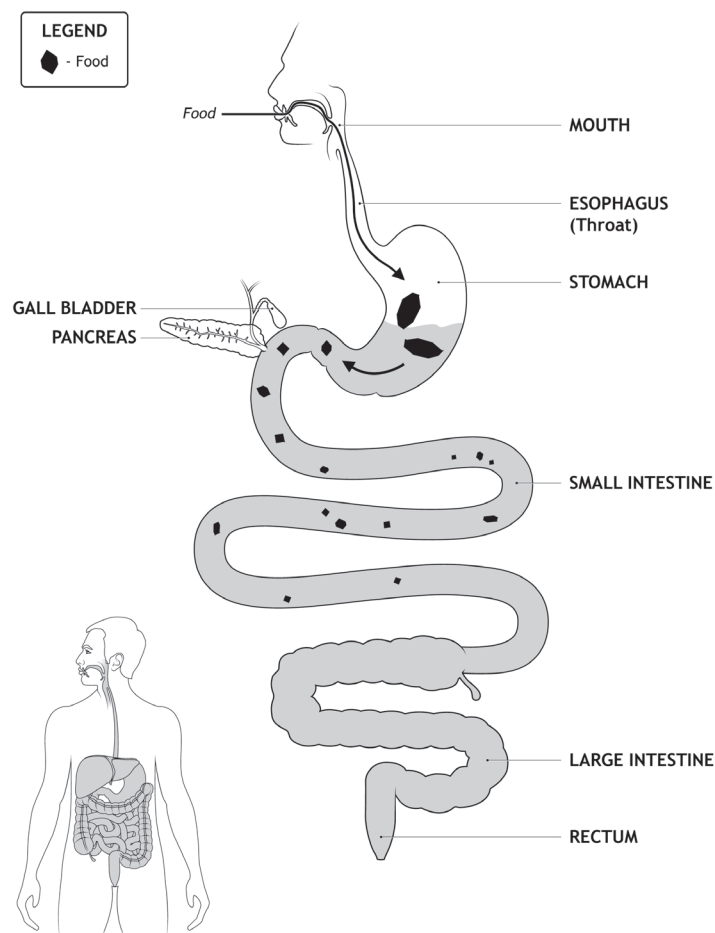
- What happens during bariatric surgery
- Lifestyle changes after surgery
- How bariatric surgery can affect the person you care about
- How bariatric surgery can affect you
- How to give support



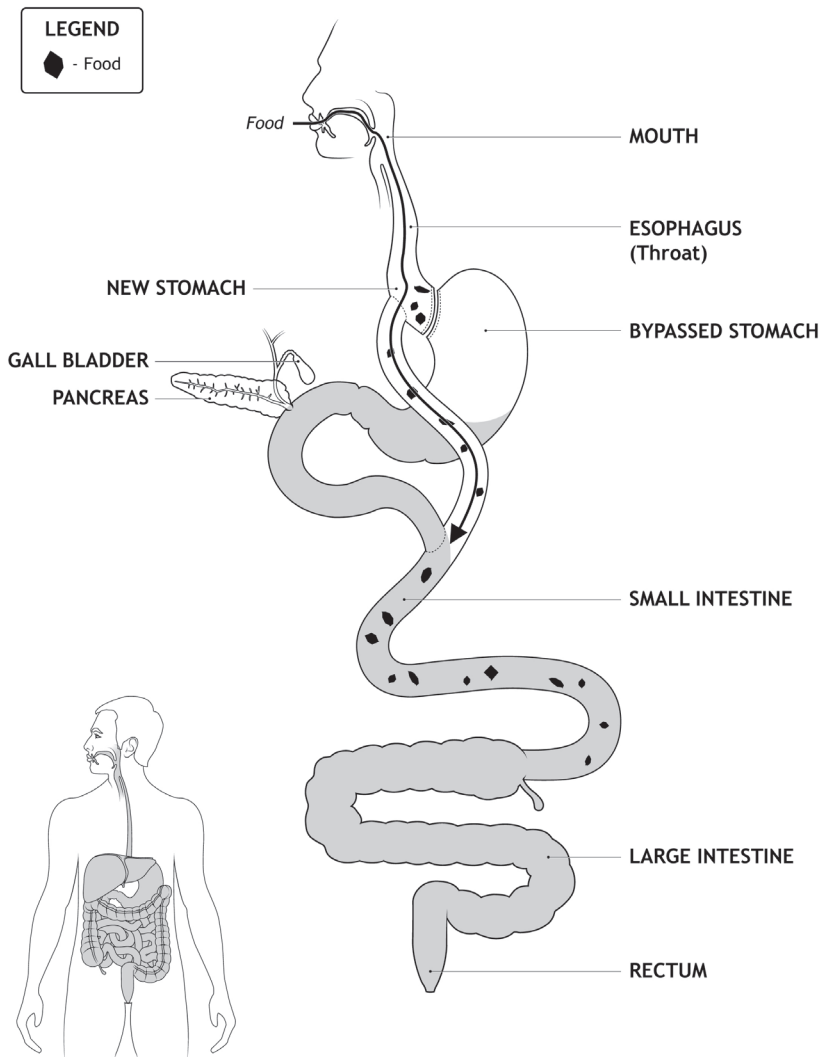
## What is bariatric surgery?

Bariatric surgery is another word for weight-loss surgery. People who struggle with their weight may choose this surgery to help them lose weight and improve their overall health. There are different types of bariatric surgery. The weight loss surgeries available at Toronto Western Hospital (TWH) Roux-en-Y (RNY) or the vertical sleeve gastrectomy (VSG).

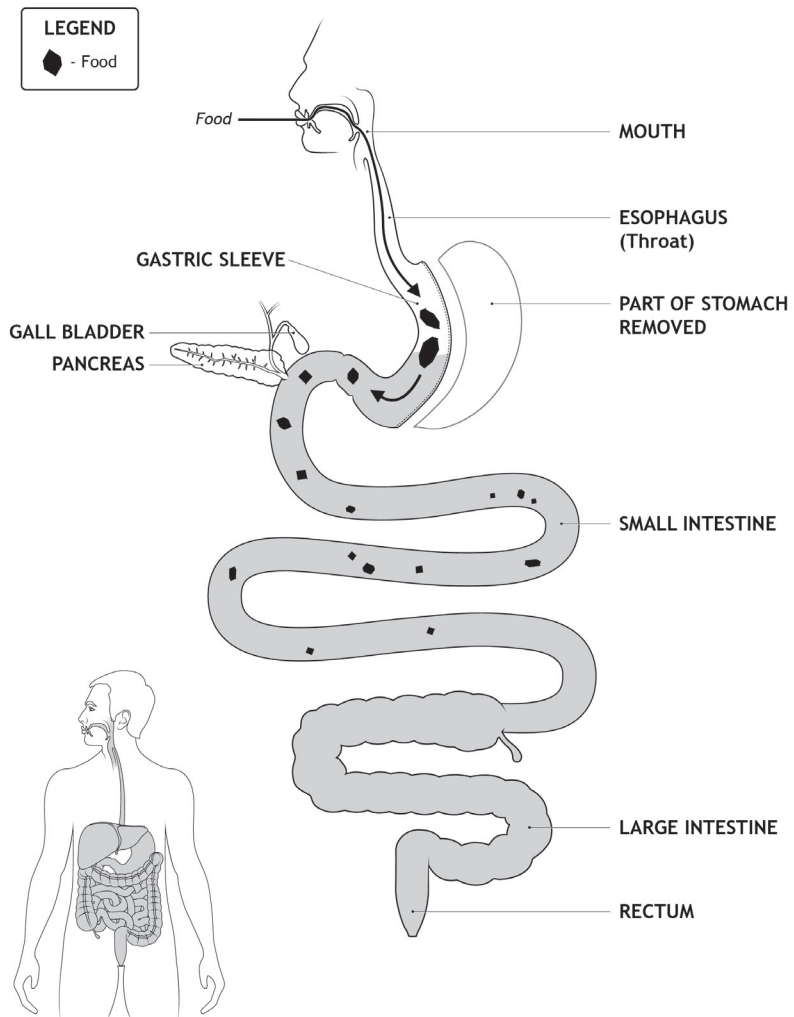
Both procedures are effective for losing weight and improving weight-related medical issues. Both procedures are covered by OHIP.



A digestive system before surgery



A digestive system after Roux-en-Y bariatric surgery



A portion of the stomach is completely removed after Vertical Sleeve Gastrectomy.

## **How will the surgery help?**

The surgery can have many health benefits. Recent research shows that bariatric surgery is an effective way to treat:

- severe obesity
- type 2 diabetes
- other health problems that come with obesity

But, surgery is only the first step. The benefits depend on the person making lifestyle changes after the surgery.

## **What are the risks?**

There are several risks with bariatric surgery, such as:

- a leak
- infection
- internal bleeding
- stomach ulcers

There is also the risk that a patient may die from complications during or after surgery. The person you care about will need to compare the risks and the benefits to determine if this surgery is the right choice for them.

## **What lifestyle changes does the person need to make?**

The person you care about has to be ready to make changes in their lifestyle for the rest of their life. They will need to:

- eat a healthy, balanced diet
- control how much and when they eat
- exercise

## **How can I support them in their decision?**

Be sensitive and understand that this decision is not easy. The person you care about has thought about it carefully. This surgery is a choice. However, it may be the only way to treat severe obesity and the other health problems that come with it.

Ask the person what they know about the surgery. The more information everyone has, the better. Then look for more information together.

Listen to the reasons why they have made this decision. It helps to keep an open mind and support them through this process.

If you are not sure how to support them, ask what would be most helpful to them. They may need emotional support, practical support, or your company in trying out new activities.

## **How can bariatric surgery affect the one I care about?**

After the surgery, people may feel many positive effects. Besides health benefits, they may have more energy and be able to move around more easily. Their mood and self-confidence may also improve. People often say they enjoy a more active life after surgery.

Making changes can be stressful and emotional. It can be very hard to stick to lifestyle changes, such as diet and exercise. If the person used food to cope with stress or strong feelings, they may turn to other unhealthy ways of coping after surgery.

This can include:

- problem gambling
- problem shopping
- drinking or using drugs
- smoking

This is more likely to happen if the person did these things before surgery.

Your support is very important. You can help them find healthier ways to manage stress or their strong feelings.

## **How can bariatric surgery affect me?**

The surgery can also affect the family and friends of the person having bariatric surgery. After surgery, the person you care about will change their eating habits

You may react in different ways. Here are some things that may happen:

- You may offer to eat the “left over” portion, causing you to gain weight.
- You may choose not to make any changes in the way you eat. This can make it harder for the person you care about to stick to their new eating habits. They may regain some or even all of the weight they lost after the surgery.
- You may adopt the new eating habits together. Making changes with the person can help the whole family. It can have benefits that lead to a better quality of life for all.
- Having a family member who has had bariatric surgery can be hard for you too. It can mean making changes to your lifestyle as well. You may find this stressful especially if you do not feel ready to make the same changes as the person having surgery and do not wish to give up familiar and comfortable habits. It’s important to be open and honest with the person having surgery so that you can work through any changes in your relationship.

### **Remember to take care of yourself.**

This can help you to support the person who had the surgery. Ask for help if you have problems coping with these changes or the stress becomes too much.

You can:

- talk to your doctor
- seek individual or family counselling services
- join a support group in your area

## **How can I help?**

There are many things that you can do to support the person through this process. Here are some examples:

### **Get involved**

Join them at appointments, classes, support groups and follow up meetings. Gather information together. You may want to watch videos, read the same books or join internet forums together. This can help the person think through some of their questions or concerns. It can also help take some of the pressure off, and make it easier to remember more information. Please check any information you get from the internet with your health care team.

### **Give emotional support**

Remember, the person you care about is going through a major life change. This change can be stressful. Be there to talk and listen to their struggles without judging.

## **Help with diet and changes to eating habits**

Making changes to eating habits includes both what they eat, and how they eat. They will need to:

- eat a healthy and balanced diet
- eat on a schedule
- avoid drinking 30 minutes before and after, as well as during mealtimes
- eat smaller portions
- take longer as they will need to chew more frequently



You can help by talking with them about these changes. You can review the bariatric surgery information and talk to them about it. See if you can find a way to enjoy your meal times as you make these changes. Also, practice mindful eating together (see tips on next page).



## What is mindful eating?

Mindful eating means paying attention to your body's signals of hunger and fullness. It also means being aware of your emotions as you eat. Mindful eating helps you make choices about food based on what your body needs.

Here are some ways to eat mindfully:

- Before you eat, ask yourself:
  - Is your body hungry, or do you have a craving?
  - Are you eating to feel better about something?
- **Taste your food.** Enjoy the flavours and textures as you eat.
- **Slow down.** Look at your food. Pay attention to what you are eating.
- Eat regularly, no more than 4 hours apart. Set up a routine for your meals, based on your schedule. Do not wait until you are starving. This is when we tend to eat too quickly.
- Try playing some soft, slow music while eating.
- Enjoy a variety of foods from different food groups.
- Explore new tastes and flavours. Try foods from different cultures.

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## **Celebrate in different ways**

In many cultures, people celebrate and come together with food. Cooking, eating and talking about food may be an important part of your relationship. To help the person you care about, try these things:

- talk about other ways to show you care that do not centre around food
- ask them how they would like to celebrate differently
- make a list of other activities you can enjoy together

## **Be helpful, not critical**

Sometimes family members may begin to act like the “food police”. They monitor and criticize eating habits because they want to help. Try to avoid this. Encourage the person and suggest other healthy activities. Some examples are trying out a new recipe or starting a new hobby. Also, it can be helpful to do them together if you feel comfortable.

## **Be careful what you say after surgery**

Avoid making comments about weight after surgery. The person who has had bariatric surgery may not feel comfortable with these comments. Be sensitive about how you congratulate what they have done. Do it in a way that does not put the focus on the numbers.

It may be hard for the person to see how much weight they have lost, especially right after surgery. It is important to listen to the person during this time and talk about what they have managed to do.

## **Look forward together**

Make plans and set goals that you can work on together. This will support the person with their weight-loss and help it to be a lasting success.

Some examples are:

- travelling
- running for charity
- gardening
- starting projects to improve your home



## Going out to eat

- Plan ahead! Check restaurant menus ahead of time to decide if it is a good place for the person to dine at.
- Remember, the person can be more sensitive to smell after surgery.
- Plan to have lots of time to enjoy the food. Eating after surgery will take longer than usual.
- Try ordering a meal and an appetizer to share, instead of 2 meals.
- Patients should not drink alcohol for at least 6 to 12 months after surgery. If you want to have a drink, ask them how they would feel about it.
- Ask the server to pack leftover food.
- The person may not want to be in a place where others are eating. If it is a group event, maybe you can join the group after the meal is over.

## Other questions you may have

### **Is it rude to eat in front of them?**

Every person has their own feelings about this. Some may be grieving over the loss of some types of food after surgery. They may not want to see others eat in front of them. Others may not mind. Understand that they are trying to have a new relationship with food. If you are not sure, ask them in a sensitive way.

### **Can I offer them an alcoholic drink?**

Usually doctors tell their patients not to drink alcohol at least 6 to 12 months after surgery. Even after this time, it is important to limit alcohol. Some patients may feel the effects of alcohol more strongly after surgery. Also, alcoholic drinks have empty calories. Keep these things in mind. Before you offer, ask them how they feel about having an alcoholic drink.

## **How soon can they start to exercise?**

The advice for most patients is to avoid hard physical activities for at least 4 weeks after surgery. The answer may be different for each person. Ask a member of the health care team at the follow up appointment after surgery.

## **What can I do if they are starting to return to their old problem habits?**

It is important to understand these things:

- Surgery is only a tool to help them kick-start healthy eating habits and an active lifestyle.
- The person may return to their old habits. This can happen as their body starts to adjust after surgery and they can eat more.
- Old habits or lifestyles do not just go away. It takes a lot of effort to change them over time.
- The person may have a hard time getting used to these changes.

Talk to the person about your concerns. Do this in a sensitive way, without judging or criticizing. Encourage them to go to their follow-up appointments at the Bariatric Surgery Program. You can also talk about your concerns with the health care team. They are your partners in supporting your loved one.

## Where can I find more general information?

Here are some website that you may find helpful:

Organization: **University Health Network: Bariatric Clinic**

Website: [https://www.uhn.ca/Surgery/Clinics/Bariatric\\_Clinic#information](https://www.uhn.ca/Surgery/Clinics/Bariatric_Clinic#information)

- Find helpful videos, material and resources on healthy eating and living before and after bariatric surgery.

Organization: **Family Service Toronto**

Website: <https://familyservicetoronto.org>

Address: 355 Church Street, Toronto, M5B 0B2

Phone: 416 595 9618

- This organization provides counselling and educational programs. They serve individuals, couples and families seeking support in dealing with many issues including:
  - relationships and family problems
  - parenting
  - depression
  - anxiety
  - life transitions

Organization: **Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario (CMHA)**

Website: <https://cmha.ca>

Toll Free Ontario: 1 800 875 6213

- CMHA provides treatment programs to people facing addiction and mental health challenges. They serve people at different stages of their lives and illnesses — from children to adults to seniors.
- Support and education for family members are also available.

Organization: **Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH)**

Website: <https://www.camh.ca>

Phone: 416 535 8501 (within Toronto)

Phone: 1 800 463 2338

- CAMH provides treatment programs for people facing addiction and mental health challenges. They serve people at different stages of their lives and illnesses — from children to adults to seniors.
- Support and education for family members are also available.

Organization: **ConnexOntario**

Website: <https://www.connexontario.ca/en-ca>

Phone: 1 866 531 2600

- Access to addiction, mental health, and problem gambling services. Referral Specialists provide information about mental health counselling services and supports in the community. Basic education about mental illness is also available.
- They are open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- You can contact them by telephone, email or web chat.

**If you or the person you care about has any concerns or questions, contact:**

**Bariatric Surgery Program**

Toronto Western Hospital  
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399 Bathurst Street  
Toronto, ON M5T 2S8

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