

# Most People in Canada and the U.S. Report That Health Plans Will Not Cover Evidence-Based Obesity Care

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## Background

Canadian clinical practice guidelines for prevention and treatment of obesity were published in 2006. In 2013, AHA, ACC, and TOS published new evidence-based guidelines for obesity treatment covering nutrition therapy, physical activity, and surgery. The Endocrine Society published pharmacotherapy guidelines in 2015. Prior evidence suggests that access to these therapies under health plans in both the U.S. and Canada might be limited. A recent example of such evidence is the Canadian Obesity Network Report Card on Access to Obesity Treatment. This research examines public perceptions about medical services covered by health plans in both countries – both generally and specifically for obesity care.

## Methods

A total of 9,517 English-speaking respondents in Canada and the U.S. completed online surveys in April 2017. Respondents answered seven questions about their health coverage for seven medical services. In the U.S., a separate sample answered questions about whether health plans should cover obesity care.

### Table 1: Survey Questions Medical and Obesity Services

Each respondent answered one question in the form of: “Do you have health coverage [for U.S. respondents, ‘insurance’] that would help pay the cost of [insert service] if you needed it?”

General Medical Services	Obesity-Related Services
a doctor’s office visit	medical weight management
a prescription blood pressure drug	an obesity/weight loss drug
hospitalization	bariatric/weight loss surgery
	a dietitian/nutritionist

### Table 2: Survey Questions Coverage of Obesity Treatment

A separate sample of U.S. respondents answered one question in the form of “How strongly do you personally agree or disagree with the following statement?”

Health insurance should cover the cost for obesity treatment just as it covers treatment for depression, heart disease, or diabetes.

Most health insurance does cover the cost for obesity treatment just as it covers treatment for depression, heart disease, or diabetes.

Strongly Disagree Strongly Agree

## Results

For general medical needs, most respondents in both countries reported having health plans that would cover some of the costs of hospitalization (62% CA, 71% U.S.), physician visits (60% CA, 68% U.S.), and hypertension meds (53% CA, 63% U.S.). For obesity care, respondents reported lower rates of coverage: RD services (32% CA, 29% U.S.), medical weight management (25% CA, 26% U.S.), bariatric surgery (18% CA, 15% U.S.), obesity meds (15% CA, 19% U.S.). Respondents in both countries were less certain about whether their health plans would cover obesity care than they were about coverage for general medical care. U.S. respondents reported that although they doubted that most health plans cover obesity care, they believed that health plans should cover it.

Table 3: Summary of Results

Question	U.S.		Canada		p-value*
	Sample	% Yes	Sample	% Yes	
Doctor’s office visits	500	68%	500	60%	0.017
Medical weight management	500	26%	501	25%	0.689
Prescription BP meds	500	63%	500	53%	0.007
Obesity/weight loss meds	1005	19%	500	15%	0.161
Hospitalization	501	71%	500	62%	0.005
Bariatric/weight loss surgery	500	15%	500	18%	0.347
Dietitian/nutritionist	503	29%	500	31%	0.379
<b>Coverage of obesity treatment (U.S.)</b>			<b>Sample</b>	<b>% Disagree</b>	<b>% Agree</b>
Health insurance should cover			1021	27%	44%
Health insurance does cover			1006	48%	20%

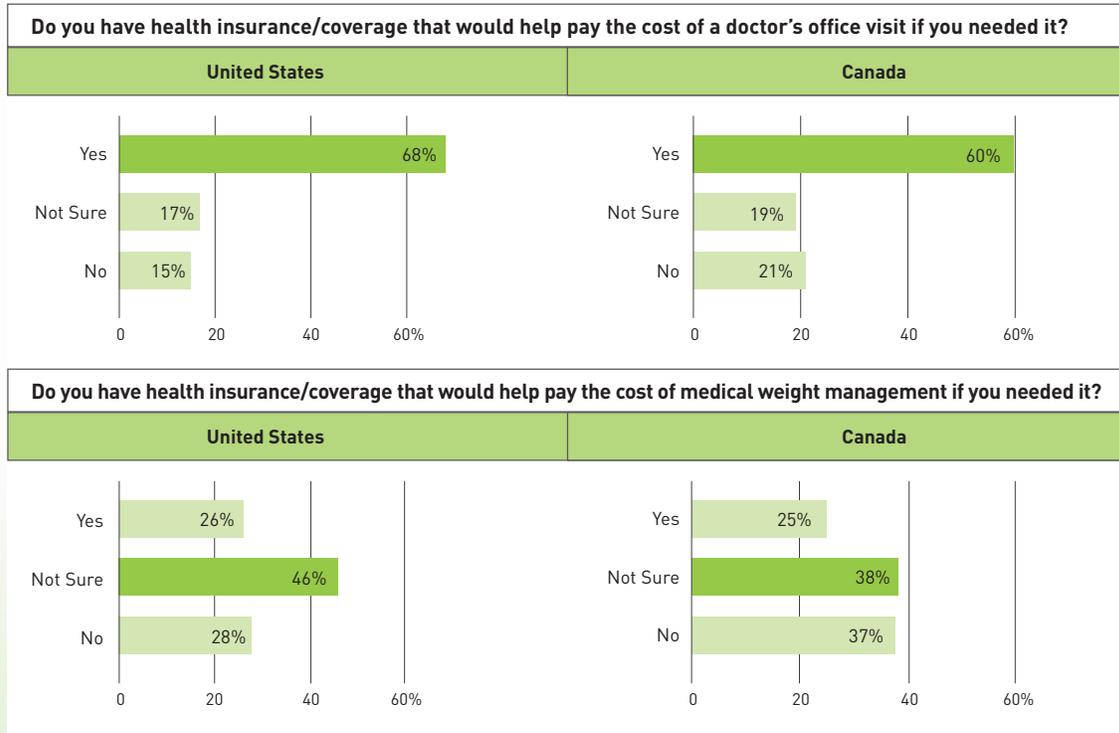
\*Two-tail z score calculation, U.S. vs Canada

## Conclusions

Years after the publication of evidence-based guidelines for obesity treatment, most people do not believe that their health plans – either in CA or the U.S. – will cover it. Although the healthcare system is publicly funded in Canada, some health services are not covered fully. Dissatisfaction with access to care has stimulated vigorous debate in both the U.S. and Canada. These factors may play a role in responses to this research.

We suggest that these data might reflect both misperceptions about what is covered and actual gaps of coverage in the U.S. and Canada.

**Figure 1: Coverage for General and Obesity Medicine Physician Visits**



**Figure 2: Public Perceptions of Obesity Care Coverage**

