



AAVBC
AMERICAN ACADEMY OF VALUE BASED CARE

Morbid Obesity

Quick Reference Guide

2026

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1 CLINICAL SNAPSHOT

Definition: Morbid obesity, or equivalently **Class III obesity** or **severe obesity**, is defined as a body mass index (BMI) ≥ 40 kg/m², or BMI 35–39.9 kg/m² with at least one weight-related comorbidity such as **type 2 diabetes, hypertension, or obstructive sleep apnea**.^{1–3} It is a chronic, complex, biologically driven disease characterized by excessive adipose tissue accumulation that substantially increases risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, obstructive sleep apnea, osteoarthritis, and certain malignancies.³ The terms 'Class III obesity,' 'severe obesity,' and 'morbid obesity' are **clinically equivalent for coding purposes**: all three **satisfy E66.01** when explicitly documented in the assessment and plan. Notably, **generic 'obesity'** for BMI ≥ 40 is an **undercoding error**.

ICD-10 Codes

(updated effective October 1, 2024):⁴ **E66.811** (obesity Class 1, BMI 30.0–34.9), **E66.812** (obesity Class 2, BMI 35.0–39.9), and **E66.813** (obesity Class 3, BMI ≥ 40) were introduced to more accurately reflect the complexity of obesity in adult and pediatric patients relative to legacy (**but still active**) ICD-10 codes **E66.0** (obesity due to excess calories), **E66.01** (morbid obesity due to excess calories, with one related comorbidity), and **E66.09** (other obesity due to excess calories) which focused primarily on excess calories as the primary cause of (morbid) obesity. Notably, morbid obesity codes E66.813, E66.01, and E66.20 (morbid [severe] obesity with alveolar hypoventilation; **Pickwickian syndrome**) are the **ONLY codes that map to HCC 48**.⁵ Supplemental BMI codes (**Z68.41–Z68.45**) document **measured BMI** but are **never diagnostic** and cannot substitute for E66.813/E66.01/E66.20. Physicians or qualified healthcare professionals must **explicitly state** 'morbid obesity,' 'severe obesity,' or 'Class III obesity' in the assessment and plan. Nurse-documented BMI in vitals is insufficient for coding.

Prevalence and Burden: Approximately 42% of U.S. adults have obesity (BMI ≥ 30), with Class III obesity (BMI ≥ 40) affecting **9.7% of adults** (>22 million individuals).⁶ Severe obesity disproportionately affects women, with a prevalence of 11.9% compared to 6.2% in men, and rates and projections indicate the highest burdens of obesity are concentrated among Black and Hispanic populations.⁷ Mortality risk rises substantially with increasing obesity severity; in a meta-analysis of 3.9 million never-smokers across 189 prospective studies, the hazard ratio for all-cause mortality was 1.94 (95% CI, 1.87–2.01) for Class II 2 obesity (BMI 35–40) and 2.76 (95% CI, 2.60–2.92) for Class III obesity (BMI ≥ 40), relative to BMI 22.5–24.9.⁸ **Multimorbidity burden is high:** midlife Class III obesity is associated with a cumulative morbidity burden of **10.32 morbidity-years** after age 65, compared with 6.10 morbidity-years for normal BMI (adjusted P0.001).⁹ While general obesity rates have not changed significantly over the last decade, severe obesity prevalence has increased by approximately 26% since 2013–2014, rising from 7.7% to 9.7%.^{6,7}

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