

10 MINUTE CLINIC PODCAST

UNINTENTIONAL WEIGHT LOSS

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Unexplained weight loss is often a cause for concern, as it may signal a significant underlying health problem. Unlike intentional weight loss achieved through diet and exercise, this loss of weight occurs without any conscious effort. While occasional fluctuations in weight are normal, losing a significant amount—typically defined as more than 5% of body weight within the previous 3 to 6 months—without any clear reason can indicate potentially serious medical or psychological conditions. Understanding the causes and implications of unexplained weight loss is essential for addressing it effectively. In this podcast we look at a logical pathway of investigating it, possible differential diagnoses and what to remember when assessing weight loss in an elderly patient.

Take-home points

- There is no formal consensus definition of unintentional weight loss
- The weight loss must be considered unintentional by both patient and their healthcare professional
- It is often defined as being weight loss of at least 5% of the patient's usual body weight that occurs in the preceding 6 months and is not due to treatment of a known existing illness
- There are multiple possible causes, including malignancy, psychiatric illness and gastroenterological disorders

- Related syndromes include sarcopenia and cachexia
- It is often a diagnostic challenge
- The key diagnostic criteria is to assess for malignancy or other conditions where early treatment may significantly improve outcome
- Unintentional weight loss is associated with both high rates of hospital admission and increased mortality, especially in older people
- Investigating unexplained weight loss requires a detailed history and clinical examination along with baseline primary care investigations such as blood tests, chest X-ray and faecal occult blood testing
- When considering weight loss in the elderly remember the mnemonics of the '9 Ds' and 'Meals on wheels'
- Unexplained weight loss can represent several different tumour types including colorectal, gastro-oesophageal, lung prostate, urological and pancreatic cancers
- Always take a holistic approach to the management of the patient with unexplained weight loss

References and resources

[Overview](#) | [Suspected cancer: recognition and referral](#) | [Guidance](#) | [NICE](#)

[Involuntary weight loss - PubMed](#)

[Investigation and management of unintentional weight loss in older adults - PubMed](#)

[Clinical evaluation for cancer in patients with involuntary weight loss without specific symptoms - PubMed](#)

[An approach to the management of unintentional weight loss in elderly people - PubMed](#)

[Losing weights: Failure to recognize and act on weight loss documented in an electronic health record - PubMed](#)

