

Position Statement on Meal Replacement Approaches in the Management of Obesity

Questions and Answers

Introduction

Meal replacements have existed for many years but in recent times a number of new studies have been published adding to the evidence and renewing interest in this approach. To help answer common questions about meal replacements and their role in weight management DOM[UK] has reviewed the scientific literature and prepared a position paper.

What is a Meal Replacement Approach?

There have been various interpretations of what is meant by ‘meal replacements’. A recently devised working definition states that meal replacements are ‘portion controlled products which are vitamin and mineral fortified and replace *one or two* meals in the day allowing one low calorie meal using standard foods [and snack/s]¹. This combination of food-based meals and portion controlled liquid shakes, bars or other replacement products is sometimes referred to as a partial meal replacement plan.

This approach provides an energy intake in the region of 1200-1600kcal/day and should not be confused with very low calorie diets that provide less than 800kcal/day and are designed to be the *sole* source of complete nutrition.

Does DOM[UK] recommend the Use of Meal Replacement Approaches?

Based on current research evidence DOM[UK] does support the inclusion of meal replacement approaches as one of a range of possible dietary treatments for overweight and obesity. It is recognised that little is known about the value of unsupported, ‘off-the-shelf’ use of meal replacement products as most of the research has evaluated this approach as part of comprehensive programmes with health professional support.

Why does DOM[UK] support the use of this approach?

Meal replacements have been found to be as effective as traditional dietary treatments in the short term with long term follow up suggesting this approach may encourage weight maintenance. None of the research published to date suggests any adverse effect of using this treatment. The commonly held belief that meal replacements are only helpful in the short term does not seem to be supported by current research.

What About Concerns Over Recommending Commercial Products?

It is understandable that dietitians are cautious when it comes to recommending commercial products as part of a weight management plan. However, the use of meal replacements as part of a comprehensive programme is supported by research, and there are now a number of different companies producing nutritionally sound meal replacement products. This means that there is no need to recommend only one manufacturer.

Who Does this Type of Dietary Treatment Suit?

At present it isn't possible to predict who does best with this kind of approach. However it might be an option to suggest if a patient

- Has tried and failed to lose weight using more traditional dietary treatments
- or
- Have difficulty finding time to prepare meals
- or
- Struggle to control or understand portion sizes.

There is clearly a strong need for education and support on healthy food choices at times when replacement products are not being used, and for ongoing weight loss maintenance.

March 2005