

Obesity

Fat is deposited on our bodies when the energy (kilojoules) we consume from food and drink is greater than the energy we use up in activities and at rest. Small imbalances over long periods of time can cause you to become overweight or obese. Obesity rates in Australia have more than doubled over the past 20 years.

Around seven million Australians are now overweight or obese. Estimates taken in the year 2000 suggest that, while more men are overweight than women (67 per cent compared to 52 per cent), obesity is more common among women (22 per cent) than men (18 per cent). The rates of overweight and obesity are rapidly increasing and it is estimated that, at the current rate of increase, about 75 per cent of the Australian population will be overweight or obese by 2020.

Body mass index

Overweight and obesity are defined by the World Health Organization using the body mass index (BMI), which is calculated by dividing a person's weight in kilograms by their height in metres squared. For example, a person who is 1.65m tall and weighs 64kg would have a BMI of 24. Find out what your BMI is.

People with a BMI of 25 or more are classified as overweight, while those with a BMI of 30 or greater are classified as obese.

Increased risk of chronic disease

Obesity increases the risk of many chronic and potentially lethal diseases. Most of these diseases are preventable with attention to lifestyle factors including proper nutrition and regular exercise. Generally speaking, the more body fat you're carrying, the higher the risk to your health. However, it appears that the amount of weight gained throughout the adult years also contributes to the risk. For example, a middle-aged person who weighs 10kg more than they did in their early 20s has an increased risk of high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes and coronary heart disease.

A range of diseases

Some of the many chronic conditions and diseases associated with obesity include:

- Insulin resistance
- High blood pressure
- Atherosclerosis
- Cardiovascular disease
- Stroke
- Particular cancers such as breast, endometrial and colon
- Type 2 diabetes (non-insulin dependent diabetes mellitus)
- Gall bladder disease
- Polycystic ovarian syndrome
- Musculoskeletal problems such as osteoarthritis and back pain
- Gout
- Cataracts
- Stress incontinence
- Sleep apnoea.

A range of causes

It seems that a range of factors working together cause obesity. Factors in childhood and adolescence are particularly influential, since about 80 per cent of obese children will grow up to be obese adults. Factors known to increase the risk of obesity include:

- **Genes** – researchers have found that genetics seems to play a part in regulating body weight. For example, it appears that some families have lower resting metabolic rates, and this makes weight gain more likely.

- **Birth factors** – some studies suggest that a person is more likely to become obese later in life if they experienced poor nutrition in utero, had a low birth weight and weren't breast fed. However, other studies show that high birth weight is a much stronger risk for becoming overweight.
- **Eating more kilojoules than you use** – whatever your genetic background, you will deposit fat on your body if you eat more energy (kilojoules) than you use. While fat storage was once very useful, as it provided a store of energy for times when food was short, this backup is now rarely needed in Australia.
- **Inactivity** – for most of us, physical activity is no longer a natural part of our daily schedule; instead, we have to make time in order to exercise. Obese people tend to live sedentary lifestyles. Studies show that obese children prefer sedentary activities to physical ones, if given the option.
- **Modern living** – most of our modern conveniences, such as cars, computers and home appliances, reduce our need to be physically active. Some studies suggest that watching television is a risk factor for obesity.
- **Socioeconomic factors** – people with lower levels of education and lower incomes are more likely to be overweight or obese. This may be because they have less opportunity to eat healthy foods and take part in physical activities.

Obesity – the costs

Obesity costs Australian taxpayers an estimated \$1.5 billion every year in direct health costs. Indirect health costs are harder to estimate. They include work absenteeism, production lost to premature death, and the hundreds of millions of dollars that Australians spend each year on weight management programs.

What the experts recommend

Experts predict that Australia's obesity rate will keep rising, which will put even greater strain on our health system. Obesity is difficult to tackle on a social scale because of the many contributing factors, but experts from the International Obesity Taskforce suggest that obesity could be addressed in the following ways:

- Help families to understand how to provide a healthy environment for themselves and their children. This would include decisions about activity and eating habits.
- Identify high risk groups in the community.
- Change city planning to include venues for safe, accessible and affordable physical activities.
- Improve the nutritional value of processed foods.
- Reduce food advertising during children's television programming.
- Reduce the price of healthy foods such as fruits, vegetables and wholegrain products.
- Improve the food available at school canteens and in workplaces.
- Improve opportunities for physical activity in schools and workplaces.
- Increase education for health professionals on how to recognise and manage weight problems in patients.
- Invest in community education programs on weight management.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- An accredited practising dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia

Things to remember

- Overweight and obesity are preventable diseases. To prevent them we need to choose lower energy foods and be more physically active.
- Rates of overweight and obesity are rising rapidly. This has a major impact on health and health care costs.
- Everyone can and should seek changes to their lifestyle to help them stay a healthy weight.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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