

## Obesity

Obesity increases the risk of many diseases. Fat is deposited on our bodies when the energy (kilojoules) we consume from food and drink is greater than the energy used 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).

### Body mass index

Overweight and obesity are defined by the World Health Organization using the body mass index (BMI). This 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.

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

BMI calculations used for adults are not a suitable measure of weight for children or adolescents. A dietitian or GP can assess a child's weight using a special BMI chart, together with weight and height growth charts.

### Increased risk of chronic disease

Obesity increases the risk of many chronic and potentially lethal diseases. Most of these diseases can be prevented with lifestyle changes including proper nutrition and regular exercise.

Generally speaking, the more body fat you're carrying, the higher the health risk. However, 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
- Some cancers including breast, endometrial and colon cancer
- 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

A range of factors can cause obesity. Factors in childhood and adolescence are particularly influential, since a high proportion of obese children and adolescents grow up to be obese adults.

Factors known to increase the risk of obesity include:

- **Genes** – researchers have found that genetics play a part in regulating body weight. However these genes explain only a small part of the variation in body weight.
- **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 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.
- **Inactivity** – for most of us, physical activity is no longer a natural part of our daily schedule. Obese people tend to live sedentary lifestyles.
- **Modern living** – most modern conveniences, such as cars, computers and home appliances, reduce the need to be physically active.
- **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 because of the many contributing factors. The International Obesity Taskforce suggests the following measures:

- 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 marketing to children.
- Reduce the price of healthy foods such as fruits, vegetables and wholegrain products.
- Improve the nutrition and variety of 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:**

Deakin University - School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences

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