



Monday, November 24, 2003

Health problems more prevalent if you're overweight

By *Flori Meeks*, contributing writer

We use it to celebrate. We turn to it for comfort. For many of us, food is much more than fuel for the body. It's an integral part of our emotional life.

Unfortunately, too many of us are making unhealthy food choices, and we're doing it too frequently. That factor, along with sedentary lifestyles and bigger food portions, are combining to create an epidemic of obesity in this country. Two-thirds of Americans now are overweight or obese.

It's a costly trend. An estimated 300,000 deaths per year may be attributable to obesity, the American surgeon general's office reports. Obesity-related health costs in this country have been estimated as high as \$117 billion a year.

Further, the problem appears to be spreading at a startling pace. Obesity rates have doubled in adults and children and tripled in teens during the last 20 years.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest cites the following examples: · Because of safety concerns, the Federal Aviation Administration has instructed airlines to add 10 pounds to approved passenger weights. · When administering vaccines and drawing blood, doctors now need longer needles to penetrate the thicker layers of fat on American's bodies. · Liposuction is the most commonly performed cosmetic surgical procedure in the United States, increasing 118 percent between 1997 and 2001. · Today's size 10 was sold as a women's size 14 in the 1940s.

The ideal weight is determined by a ratio of height and weight. Those who weigh between 25 and 29 pounds more than the ideal weight usually are considered overweight, and those weighing at least 30 pounds more are considered obese.

If you are overweight, you're more likely to develop health problems such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, certain types of cancer, gout (joint pain caused by excess uric acid) and gallbladder disease.

Being overweight also can cause problems such as sleep apnea (interrupted breathing during sleep) and osteoarthritis (wearing away of the joints). The more overweight you are, the more likely you are to have health problems.

Increases in childhood obesity are a particular source of concern. About 58 percent of overweight schoolchildren already have at least one cardiovascular risk factor, and 20 percent have two or more, including elevated insulin levels, high blood pressure and elevated cholesterol.

From 1979 to 2000, health-care costs for obesity-related conditions in youths ages 6 to 17 increased from \$35 million to \$127 million.

Despite the serious health risks facing youths and adults, they can be reversed, health professionals say. If you're overweight, losing at little as 5 to 10 percent of your body weight may alleviate many of the problems linked to being overweight, such as high blood pressure and diabetes. Losing and keeping off weight is an attainable goal, if it's approached wisely. Talk to your doctor about a weight-loss plan. And remember to strive for slow weight loss, about one pound a week. Rapid weight loss can cause you to lose muscle rather than fat. It also increases your chances of developing other health problems, such as gallstones or nutrient deficiencies.

Making long-term changes in your eating and physical activity habits is the best way to lose weight and keep it off over time. This approach should include a healthy, varied diet that emphasizes high-fibers, whole grains and lots of fruits and vegetables. These foods will fill you up and are lower in calories than foods full of oils or fats. Help yourself make healthy choices by reading food labels and educating yourself about fat and sugar content.

Combine your dietary changes with an increase in physical activity. Try to do at least 30 minutes of physical activity a day on most days of the week.

It also helps to enlist support. That support can range from family and friends who offer encouragement to structured weight-

loss programs. If you go this route, look for reputable programs that encourage slow weight loss and life-long healthy eating habits.

This is the fourth article in a series on health-related issues. By being an informed health-care consumer, OU employees can help contain and reduce benefit costs to the university.

SUMMARY

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Created by CareTech Administrator (webservices@caretechsolutions.com) on Monday, November 24, 2003

Modified by CareTech Administrator (webservices@caretechsolutions.com) on Monday, November 24, 2003

Article Start Date: Tuesday, December 2, 2003