

Obesity in America

The most recent statistics on the general health of Americans are not encouraging. Current assessments indicate that over 60% of Americans meet criteria for being either overweight or obese. Overweight is defined as Body Mass Index (BMI) of 25 or above, and obesity as a BMI of 29.9 or above. BMI is a ratio of your height and weight. Cardiovascular Health and Fitness staff can help you determine your BMI. Excess weight initiates a cascade of health problems through related conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke, joint degeneration, sleep apnea and most recently, obesity has been linked to cancer.

The introductory paragraph of a recent MSNBC health article (3/12/03) reads: "Obesity exacts a higher toll on health and healthcare costs than either smoking or drinking as serious obesity related problems like diabetes, near epidemic levels,"—MSNBC Health article 3/12/03.

The results of a recent research study by Dee W. Edington, Director of the University of Michigan's Health Management Research Center, found that overweight and obese people have medical bills up to \$1500 greater a year than those not carrying excess weight. For years, health experts have correlated adult weight gain with technology, quickly obtained fatty foods, and the ever decreasing need for Americans to physically move from place to place as the primary culprits in the current fat epidemic. Unfortunately, weight problems are common in children as well as adults. Fifteen percent of youngsters ages 6-19 and ten percent of children 2 through 5 are considered seriously overweight. The incidence of obesity-linked conditions (High BP, Diabetes Mellitus, etc.) in children is at an all-time high. Dr. William Stull, Director of the Center for Nutrition and Weight Management at Geisinger Medical Center, Danville, PA, highlights the contribution of the "3 N's: Netscape, Nintendo, and Nickelodeon" to the current obesity trends among children. Gone are the days of children arriving home from school, changing into "play clothes", and participating in outdoor activities until dark. Similarly, adults are no longer required to exert themselves physically because of modern conveniences (drive-throughs, remote controls, computers, elevators, etc.,). Obesity rates in the United States nearly doubled in the 1990's, from around 12 percent to 23 percent in 1998.

As previously stated, there is a domino effect associated with dramatic weight gain: People become more sedentary and less able to tolerate exercise. The heart has to work harder to supply oxygen-rich blood to the extra tissue. (extra work due to an increased area). In some cases, the body becomes resistant to its own insulin, blood sugar levels begin to increase and Type II diabetes develops. In most cases, excess weight lends itself to increased blood cholesterol levels and high blood pressure. This process presents us with the beginning of cardiovascular disease.

Those who fall into the category of being obese due to "glandular problems" make-up 1% of the population. Therefore, weight gain for most people, is the result of increased energy intake and decreased energy output. Translation: We eat too much and do not exercise enough. This is where knowing and doing collide. Exercising and being attentive to diet requires effort and long-term commitment. Our society demands "immediate gratification" with most things (Ex: Standing in front of a microwave and saying "hurry-up"). Seemingly, if it takes too long, requires too much effort, or is

uncomfortable, we will opt not to do it. We also factor in, that if anything goes wrong with our health, there is an intervention or pill that will “fix us”.

“If you are standing on the tracks and you see the train coming, common sense dictates that you get out of the way”.

This adage applies to a multitude of topics and very appropriately to the cascade of health problems that will accompany excess weight. We know that excess weight leads to a domino effect of health issues. Interventions and medications do not fix things 100%. The only true fix is prevention. Doing that which has been proven useful and beneficial. Losing weight is difficult. Lifestyle change is especially difficult. The good news is that a modest 5-10% loss of weight can improve your health. This translates to 10-20 lbs. for a 200lb. Person. In some ways convenience and technology have not benefited us.

There is a certain percentage of responsibility that we, as individuals, have to assume for our own well-being. Exercise Physiologists, Dietitians, Nurses, Doctors, Physical Therapists, and other health care personnel only help the patient navigate the waters. They cannot, as well, propel the ship. This is the patient’s responsibility. To follow through making sure we see our physicians consistently, make good dietary choices, get an appropriate amount of exercise, and make other lifestyle changes. No one will take care of you as well as you can.

References:

MSNBC webpage 3/12/03 “Obesity Worse for Health than Smoking”

America on the Move

Dr. William Stull, Director of the Center for Nutrition and Weight Management at Geisinger Medical Center , Danville, PA

WEB MD Health “Medical Reasons for Obesity” 7/09/03