Obesity and Its Health Effects

By ACSH Staff — December 2, 2008

Obesity is increasing at alarming rates in our society. While excessive attention to thinness carries its own physical and mental health problems, increasing overweight is a much larger problem in our society and currently affects over two thirds of the population. This handbook sponsored by the American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) has been written with the layman in mind and is meant to be a comprehensive and concise source of reliable information for the educated consumer. In contrast to smoking, which has decreased due to improved public health awareness, overweight and obesity have steadily increased particularly over the last twenty-five years.

On average, obesity shortens life by six to seven years. Excess weight increases the risk of deadly diseases such as heart disease, stroke and cancer. One of the great ironies of advances in medical technology is that deaths due to heart attacks, stroke, and cancer, which have rapidly declined in the past, are now leveling off and in some cases increasing due to obesity-related conditions. For example, diabetes, which is directly related to being overweight, is increasing rapidly, and deaths due to heart disease in diabetics are also increasing. Similarly, cancers linked to obesity, such as colon, prostate, and breast, are also increasing. Right now the American Cancer Society considers obesity to be the second largest cause of preventable cancer, after cigarette smoking. Within ten years, obesity might exceed smoking as an avoidable cause of cancer.

Of even greater concern is the increase in overweight and obesity among children, adolescents, and young adults. Shockingly, we are now seeing Type 2 diabetes in young people whereas this used to be a disease of middle age. While the implications for the future wellbeing of our society are grave, the good news is that interventions to reduce overweight among young people have long-lasting effects on future weight. Increased awareness of the complications of obesity can be a strong motivation to adopt healthier lifestyles.
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