

Health Care Issue: Weight Matters - Obesity, the Most Serious Nutritional Problem in North America - 2004

The body is the soul's house. Shouldn't we therefore take care of our house
so that it will not fall into ruin?
(Philo, 20 B.C.E. – 50 C.E.)

Issue

Obesity and inactivity have been identified as a leading cause of preventable death in North America. The detrimental effects of poor diet and sedentary lifestyle can be reversed through education and lifestyle changes.

Background

The number of deaths in the United States due to poor diet and physical inactivity rose between 1990 and 2000 from 14.0% to 16.6%. In a study released by the Federal Center for Disease Control and Prevention, which appeared in the Journal of the American Medical Association, poor diet and physical inactivity caused 400,000 deaths in 2000 representing a 33 percent jump over 1990. Obesity will surpass tobacco-related deaths if the current trend continues. This study was the latest in a long line of research documenting widespread weight gain – and its consequences – among Americans, from children to seniors.

Like tobacco, obesity and inactivity increase the risks for the top three killers: heart disease, cancer, and cerebrovascular diseases/strokes. Obesity and a sedentary lifestyle strongly increase the risk of type two diabetes (also called adult-onset diabetes), the sixth leading cause of death.

A separate report by the Rand Corporation think tank found that increases in obesity threaten to erase improvements in health among middle-age and older Americans. At current rates, health care spending on obesity among people 50 to 69 years olds is expected to increase by 50 percent by the year 2020.

The fast-food lifestyle, increased sedentary activity due to the technology age and a decline in school physical education programs are factors contributing to the obesity problem. In the United States, two out of three adults and nine million children are overweight or obese.

Health care providers generally agree that people who have a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 30 or more can improve their health through weight loss. Preventing additional weight gain is recommended if you have a BMI between 25 and 29.9. Obesity experts recommend that you try to lose weight if you have two or more of the following:

- Family history of heart disease or diabetes
- Pre-existing high blood pressure, high cholesterol levels, or high blood sugar levels
- An “apple” shape: If your weight is concentrated around your waist, you may have a higher risk of heart disease, diabetes, or cancer than people of the same weight who have a “pear” shape

In 1992 the U.S. Department of Agriculture released a Food Guide Pyramid which was intended to help the American public make dietary choices that would maintain good health and reduce the risk of chronic diseases. After years of study, a newly revised Food Guide Pyramid is in the process of development, which may change

For more information on WRJ and Social Justice, visit www.wrj.org/social-justice-home

the recommended daily requirements of different food types. A current project of several agencies recommends that people eat five to nine portions of fruits and vegetables daily. The “Five a Day” campaign is led by the American Cancer Institute. Among Americans, women as a group eat the healthiest diet which has been attributed to their better knowledge of nutritional information. According to studies from the Harvard School of Public Health the best way to avoid obesity is to limit total calories in the diet, not just fat. Their revised food pyramid emphasizes weight control through exercising daily and avoiding an excessive total intake of calories.

Many states are making attempts to slow the increase in obesity among children. About two dozen of them are considering bans or limits on vending machine products in schools. Roughly twenty states already restrict students’ access to junk food after lunch. The Texas Agriculture Department is revamping rules on what foods public schools can serve their students, cutting out deep-fried foods and reducing fat and sugar in the menu.

On September 30, 2003, in an address to the American Association of Family Physicians Congress of Delegates, President Michael O. Fleming, M.D. issued a personal challenge to AAFP members to take steps to improve their own health. He said that obesity was a serious health concern and that the AAFP was working on developing a new program called Americans in Motion, AIM, which will provide physicians tools to help their patients fight obesity. Dr. Fleming made a personal commitment to accept the challenge of living a healthier life and he urged each doctor to join him. Dr. Fleming called on all family practitioners to be role models for their patients, their families and their communities. Dr. Fleming made the following commitments to:

- Wear a pedometer and aim to walk 10,000 steps each day.
- Use a personal scale to monitor his Body Mass Index (BMI).
- Enroll in the Active Lifestyle Program (www.presidentschallenge.org), a program of the U.S. President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports that urges citizens to participate in at least thirty minutes of activity five days a week for six consecutive weeks.

Just as Dr. Fleming asked his fellow physicians to “walk the talk,” it is incumbent upon the leadership of Women of Reform Judaism to encourage our sisterhoods to recognize the challenge of obesity and inactivity which threatens the health of ourselves, our families, and the people of our nation and to take action to reverse the trend by promoting awareness and improved dietary and physical activity practices.

Statement

Therefore Women of Reform Judaism urges all of its affiliated sisterhoods to:

- 1) Educate themselves, their congregations, and their communities about the increasingly serious problem of obesity and inactivity, which increases the risk of many serious diseases and is one of the leading causes of death in North America.
- 2) Join, where possible, with other community groups, to recommend and advocate appropriate legislative actions regarding this serious problem, including:
 - Rules on what foods public schools can serve their students;
 - Restricting access to junk food in schools;
 - Banning or limiting vending machines that provide junk foods in schools; and
 - Encouraging school systems to add or maintain physical education programs.
- 3) Develop programming for sisterhoods that educates and encourages weight control, provides knowledge about healthful nutrition based on current research, and emphasizes more active lifestyles.

For more information on WRJ and Social Justice, visit www.wrj.org/social-justice-home