

Welcome to America... the fattest nation in the world!

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We see it everywhere and we pay for it each time our insurance premium goes up or there isn't enough profit to get an increase in pay..... Obesity, now considered by most health experts around the world as an epidemic carrying profound negative health consequences.

Described by the World Health Organization as an "escalating epidemic", obesity is "one of the greatest neglected public health problems of our time with an impact on health which may well prove to be as great as smoking."

Many adults battle the bulge without lasting success. And many know that the top five health killers in America - heart disease, cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure and stroke are related to those extra pounds around the belt buckle. In fact, it has been estimated that greater than 70% of persons who are obese have at least one established comorbid condition. The epidemic knows no barriers. Increases in obesity occur across virtually all ethnic, racial and socioeconomic populations and all ages. Of additional concern are the already vast and rapidly increasing number of obese children - an alarming 30 percent of our future is at risk for the same health killers -- only they will suffer at an earlier age. Recent data reveal that greater than 10% of 4-5 year old children and more than 20% of 12-19 year old adolescents are obese. Research shows that obese children become obese adults. In the decade between 1980 and 1990, the prevalence of obesity grew from 25% to more than 33%. This represent a 40% INCREASE. Half of all adults are overweight!

Consider this: Behind only cigarette smoking, health care dollars spent each year, obesity costs \$68 billion consuming more than 6% of the total US health care expenditures.

Consider this: at least half the adult population suffers from obesity which can be controlled, in many situations, without medication(s). Sound simple? You bet it does.

Unfortunately, controlling calories and increasing energy expenditures is very difficult. Why the epidemic with all the knowledge and interest in diets and nutrition? I thought there was a fitness boom among the baby boomers? What about genetics? Estimates of the heritability of obesity have ranged widely, with some early estimates as high as 80% to more recent estimates at 30% to 40%. Environmental forces play a strong role in obesity. Consumers want quick, easy and convenient foods to eat. Numerous opportunities to dine out offer serving sizes such as large, jumbo, super and giant to choose from. Add labor saving devices such as remote controls for television, garage doors, dish washers, clothes washers and dryers and drive thru windows, are we ever going to win with war?

Guidelines from the National Institutes of Health and the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, recommend obesity be recognized as a chronic disease that includes periodic flare-ups of weight regain. The disease is never cured but arrested and then controlled. Treatment must be designed to appropriately treat the problem of weight regain acutely and chronically. The acute stage can be defined as rapid weight gain with comorbidities emerging or increasing in severity. The chronic stage is when weight and health are stable within manageable parameters.

The United States is facing another epidemic - "inactivity". Only 22% of adults are actively involved in physical activity (ie., regular physical activity for at least 30 minutes/day). Approximately 54% are intermittently active but do not meet this standard and 24% are completely sedentary. Levels of physical activity among children have declined in the past 20 years. Physical fitness has taken the back burner at most schools. Safety is another concern for parents who want their children inside where they are safe. And of course, one must not forget the video games, VCR for movies and the increase in number of television shows thanks to cable TV. Remember when we had only 3 stations to watch? Research shows physical activity that expends at least 1,500 kcal/week , and perhaps as much as 2,000 kcal/week, is optimal to help maintain weight loss; walking is almost always the most appropriate form of physical exercise for obese persons.

As we enter the new millennium, instead of chronic diseases from malnutrition seen at the turn of the century (rickets, scurvy, osteomalacia, pellagra) we will see the other side of the coin... overnutrition causing heart disease, cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure and stroke.