

Obesity: Why, How and More

By Allison Tannis BSc MSc RHN

As the market place is full of quick weight loss solutions promising drastic reductions in weight with a flip of their magical wand, it's important to understand why we are obese and why we should care how heavy we are.

Obesity represents a major threat to health and quality of life. According to the International Obesity Task Force, 1.7 billion people worldwide were obese in 2003. The United States Census Bureau estimates that the prevalence of adults in the United States, aged 20-74, who are overweight and obese, today stands at 65% and will reach 73% by 2008.

Why are we so fat?

Some experts say that it's because humans have similar eating patterns to the rat – humans will eat until overfed. This is an evolutionary response to eat and store energy to be able to survive a future famine. However, when, if ever, does the local supermarket run out of food? We are not likely to see a famine in the near future in North America. Therefore, we never find a need to use all of this energy we are storing.

With each generation we appear to be storing more energy for this fictional upcoming famine. According to Professor Roland Auer, of the University of Calgary we are fat because we eat 15% more calories with each generation.

According to the World Health Organization we are fat because we've transitioned our food choices towards refined foods, food of animal origin, and increased fat. According to all of these experts, we are fat because we may have genes that tell us to overeat, we eat more with each generation and we choose the wrong foods.

Why do we care if we are fat?

Clothes come in all sizes and body fat is useful as it keeps us warm in the winter. What is the concern? Well, obesity is a concern because it is associated with disease. Excessive body fat is associated with an increased cancer risk. A study that observed 900,000 people for 16 years estimated that excess body fat may account for 14% of all cancer deaths in men and, 20% of cancer deaths in women. This type of convincing research warns us of the danger of obesity.

Physical Activity for Weight Loss?

Although obesity has strong genetic determinants, it is generally accepted that it results from an imbalance between food intake and daily physical activity. We eat too

much food and exercise too little. This is reflected in the health guidelines across North America which focuses on two particular lifestyle factors: increasing levels of physical activity and reducing the intakes of fat and sugars.

Most health experts agree that all long term weight loss programs should include regular exercise. However, does exercise directly reduce weight? There is disagreement among the scientific experts as to how much exercise is needed to achieve weight loss and whether or not there is a dose response effect.

For those of you who cringe at the idea of a weight loss plan that includes intense workouts such as the stair climber that makes you feel like you are climbing Mount Everest, or the rowing machine seems like it's in the ocean during a hurricane – never fear. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported a study of women who were put on a calorie reduced diet and varying exercise programs for a year. They found that regardless of exercise intensity the women attained weight loss (average 13 to 20 lbs), maintained the weight loss and improved cardiovascular fitness. In other words, you do not have to train for a marathon to lose weight.

Any amount of exercise can help with weight management. Do what you can so that you will keep doing it. Everest and the ocean are not necessary to achieve weight loss. Most importantly, exercise and physical fitness are associated with increased energy, feelings of contentment and reduced risk of some diseases. Exercise is a part of a healthy lifestyle and should be a part of everyone's daily routines.

How to Lose Weight?

The shelves are packed with various books touting the latest diet plan. Each diet book promising to offer greater weight loss effects than the others. However, we have yet to find the be-all-end-all of diets. Scientific investigation of various diet forms has found that in the end a diet that is rich in vegetables, whole grains and low-fat foods is a good way to lose weight. However, the only scientifically proven way to lose weight is to have a net caloric loss of 500 calories per day. This can be achieved by cutting back on snacks, dressings and high calorie drinks, in addition to participating in a daily exercise plan. This year be successful and achieve your desired weight loss goal with a healthy diet and some exercise.