



# The Obesity Epidemic

The International Council of Nurses  
Informed Patient Project

**Have** you noticed? Obesity is making headlines these days. There are at least two reasons for this. First, the number of obese people is increasing rapidly around the globe, so much so that the World Health Organization has declared obesity a global epidemic. Second, and the human story behind the numbers, obesity increases an individual's risk of acquiring any number of debilitating or potentially fatal conditions. Did you know, for instance, that obesity is reported as the second leading cause of preventable death after smoking?<sup>1</sup>

## Embrace a healthy lifestyle

Adopting healthy lifestyle habits is your best defense against overweight and obesity. No matter what your current weight, follow the tips below to get or stay on track:

- ✓ Assess how your weight stacks up right now. Tables to determine BMI are commonly available; for example, access [http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/guidelines/obesity/bmi\\_tbl.htm](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/guidelines/obesity/bmi_tbl.htm).
- ✓ If you are overweight or obese, consult your nurse, physician and/or dietitian for weight counselling and assistance in determining where and how to make lifestyle changes.
- ✓ If you need to lose weight, do so gradually. Physical activity aids weight loss, particularly when combined with calorie reduction within a balanced diet.<sup>6</sup>
- ✓ Reduce your intake of high-fat and processed foods.
- ✓ Get active! Try to include regular physical activity in your everyday routines. Where possible, walk instead of taking the car or bus, for example. Consider taking up a sport you like, or dancing. In short, keep moving.
- ✓ Turn off the television or reduce the amount you watch.
- ✓ Adopt a healthy family lifestyle.

Finally, keep in mind that regular physical activity and a balanced diet will do more than help you keep your weight in check. They'll promote your overall health as well. And that's something to feel good about.

## Obese or overweight?

We often hear the terms 'obese' and 'overweight' used interchangeably. They are distinct conditions, however. Obesity means you have excess body fat. Overweight means you have an excess amount of weight for your height – weight that can come from muscle, bone, fat and/or body water.

The most common method used to determine both overweight and obesity is the Body Mass Index (BMI). This is a simple and direct calculation based on your weight and height. A BMI between 25 and 30 indicates you are overweight, while a BMI over 30 defines you as clinically obese.<sup>2</sup>

## Who gains weight?

Generally, men are more likely to be overweight, while women are more likely to be obese.<sup>3</sup> In men, BMI tends to increase until the age of 50, when it levels off; in women, weight tends to increase until age 70 before reaching a plateau.

There are three high-risk periods for weight gain in women: at the onset of menstruation, particularly if it is early; after pregnancy, with a higher risk for women who are already overweight; and after menopause.<sup>4</sup>

## Why this epidemic?

Today's global epidemic of obesity can't be explained simply according to gender, genetics, poor self-discipline or a failed psychological upbringing. Rather, the culprit is an industrialised way of life, one that promotes unhealthy eating patterns while discouraging physical activity.<sup>5</sup> In all regions of the world, obesity seems to grow as prosperity and income increase.

Around the globe, marketing efforts encourage us to eat processed and high-fat snack foods, and rarely fruits and vegetables. Meanwhile, we've seen the emergence of a sedentary society. Fewer people work in physically demanding occupations like farming, we take the car where we could bike or walk, and too much time is spent in front of the television or computer. Low-activity pursuits like television, videogames and computers play a critical role in childhood and adolescent obesity.



## Obesity is a Risk Factor

Obesity is a significant risk factor for a range of diseases and conditions, including:

- Cardiovascular diseases
- Diabetes mellitus (type 2, non-insulin-dependent)
- Various forms of cancer
- High blood pressure and stroke
- High blood levels of cholesterol
- Gastrointestinal and liver diseases
- Musculoskeletal problems
- Gall-bladder disease
- Varicose veins
- Sleep apnea
- Depression and accidents
- Low self-esteem

## Did you know...?

- Obesity is estimated to affect 18% of the global population, an increase of 50% in the last seven years.<sup>7</sup>
- There are approximately 300 million obese adults worldwide and many more are overweight.<sup>8</sup>
- The World Health Organization has estimated that about 22 million children under 5 years old are overweight.<sup>9</sup>
- Overweight children are more likely to become overweight adults and to experience chronic health problems associated with adult obesity.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Secretariat of 1<sup>st</sup> International Conference and World Forum on Technology Transfer of Obesity and Nutrition, Cairo, Egypt 25-28 June 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Related to Overweight and Obesity, <http://www.niddk.nih.gov/health/nutrit/pubs/statobes.htm#what>.

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization (2002). Nutrition Controlling the Global Obesity Epidemic, Author, Geneva, <http://www.who.int/nut/obshtm>.

<sup>4</sup> Obesity: Worldwide Epidemic? (2002), <http://www.echoedvoices.org/Feb2002/Obesity.html>.

<sup>5</sup> World Heart Federation (2001). Obesity threatens the heart. News Release, August.

<sup>6</sup> Surgeon General's Healthy Weight Advice for Consumers, <http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity/calltoaction/toc.htm>

<sup>7</sup> La Velle, Marquisa (social anthropologist, University of Rhode Island). The Independent. Monday February 18 2002. Steve Connor ed.

<sup>8</sup> *Supra*, note 3.

<sup>9</sup> World Heart Federation (June 2002). Obesity/Nutrition.