

American Medical Women's Association
Position Paper on Principals of Obesity and Overweight in the U.S.

The American Medical Women's Association is a professional organization of women physicians and medical students with a core mission to improve women's health. Excess body weight is not only an important women's health problem, it is a health problem for all Americans, and is addressed as such in this paper. Women have a unique role, because in addition to improving their own health by addressing this problem, they are most often responsible for providing nutrition for families, and therefore can assist in addressing this problem in men and children.

Obesity and Overweight are serious medical problems

In the United States, the numbers of obese and overweight adults and children have increased dramatically in the last 20 years. The Surgeon General has reported that in 1999 61% of U.S. adults and 13% of children were overweight or obese. Dr. David Satcher stated that obesity in adults has doubled in the last 20 years and overweight in adolescents has tripled. (1) Obesity and overweight are calculated using a formula relating weight and height that yields a single number called the Body Mass Index (BMI). In adults, overweight is defined as a BMI of 25-29.9 kg/m², and obesity is a BMI 30 kg/m² and over. (2) Although many people believe that obesity and overweight simply affect personal appearance, these conditions are serious medical problems that can lead to chronic debilitating diseases. Excess body weight increases the risk for coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes mellitus, osteoarthritis, and cancers of the breast, uterus, prostate and colon, as well as many other serious medical conditions. An estimated 300,000 deaths per year are associated with obesity and overweight. This compares ominously with the 400,000 deaths associated with cigarette smoking, the other major preventable cause of death in the U.S. The successes in treating obesity related health problems could be nullified by this epidemic of obesity. (2)

Causes of Obesity and Overweight in the United States

There are many reasons for increasing body weight in the population of this country. These include genetic predisposition, social environment and customs, ignorance of nutritional values of foods, excessive portion size of purchased meals, and declining rates of exercise. For children, loss of regular gym classes and increased sedentary pastimes like computer use or TV viewing, are special contributors. Only one-third of Americans exercise at least 30 minutes, three days per week, the recommended minimum. Forty percent of adults do not participate in any leisure-time physical activity. (1) The increase in obese and overweight children has serious portents. Obesity at age 6 confers a 25% chance of becoming an obese adult, and obesity at age 12 yields a 75% chance of obesity in adulthood. (3) In women there are times of life that are particularly associated with excessive weight gain: menarche, pregnancy, and menopause. (4)

Preventing Obesity and Overweight

Because of the difficulty in treating obesity and overweight once they have developed, prevention is the most desirable strategy. Prevention requires family education about nutrition and implementation of healthy eating plans in the home that can lead to permanent healthy eating patterns and choices. Food available on school campuses should also be of good nutritional value. Prevention also involves introducing and maintaining a schedule of regular physical exercise from an early age. The Surgeon General recommends daily, quality physical education for all school grades, as well as increasing work site and community venues for physical activity. (1) Adults can build moderate activity into their daytime routines by simple measures like climbing stairs instead of using elevators, walking for part or all of their commute to work, and doing household maintenance and gardening. (2)

Physicians and other health care providers can participate in prevention by being aware of helpful practices and vulnerable life stages, when the risk of permanent weight gain is high. This is particularly true in women at menarche, pregnancy, and menopause. Providers can encourage women to breast-feed, which has been shown to decrease the incidence of becoming overweight as adolescents in those breastfed babies. (5)

Treating Obesity and Overweight

The National Institutes of Health and the North American Association for the Study of Obesity have published a well-researched Guide for the Identification, Evaluation and Treatment of Overweight and Obesity in Adults. The stepwise approach to treatment starts with dietary therapy, physical activity, and behavioral therapy. In eligible high-risk patients, pharmacotherapy or surgical therapy may be recommended. The goal is to reduce the risk and severity of obesity-related diseases.

American Medical Women's Association Recommendations

AMWA believes:

In public education:

- Nutrition classes should be taught at all levels;
- School meals should reflect a well-balanced diet; and
- Regular and consistent physical activity should be mandatory in all grades.

In the community:

- Existing facilities should be available for recreation and safe pedestrian pathways should be maintained; and
- Future community planning should allow for adjacent commercial and residential areas to encourage less dependence on automobiles.

AMWA encourages:

- Physicians and other health care providers to view overweight and obesity as lifetime health issue that needs continuing attention because of its high health risks;
- Health care providers to learn and actively use the current prevention and treatment recommendations; and
- Health care providers to refer patients to specialists in obesity management for further assistance, if necessary.

AMWA recommends:

- Funding for research on the causes, prevention and treatment of this critical American health problem be given high priority and that this research also includes children.
- The FDA mandate easy-to-understand nutritional labeling become a standard for all food labels;
- A national media campaign to reverse the trend of sedentary lifestyles and excessive food consumption should be designed, similar in scope to smoking cessation campaigns; and
- There should be Federal support for better screening and treatment of childhood obesity.

REFERENCES

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5. Risk of overweight among adolescents who were breastfed as infants. *JAMA*. 2001;285:2461-2467.