Obesity Information

The American Heart Association (AHA) recently issued an overview on obesity and achieving a healthy weight. According to the AHA, having a body mass index (BMI) of 30 or higher is considered obese. Research shows that having excessive fat particularly around your waist puts a person at a higher risk for health problems such as heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, type II diabetes and more. A BMI between 25 kg/m² and 29.9 kg/m² is considered overweight, a BMI between 18.5 and 25 kg/m² indicates a normal weight and a BMI of less than 18.5 kg/m² is considered underweight.

According to the most recent obesity statistics from the AHA:

- Nearly 13 million (16.9%) of U.S. children ages 2 to 19 are obese.
- Approximately one in three (31.8%) U.S. children (23.9 million) ages 2 to 19 are overweight or obese.
- More than one-third (about 35%) of U.S. adults is obese (more than 78 million adults).
- $190 billion a year spent in weight-related medical bills according to the American Heart Association

As stated by the AHA, nearly 78 million adults and 13 million children in the United States deal with the health and emotional effects of obesity every day. The recommendations of taking in fewer calories a day, while increasing the amount of calories burned with regular exercise sounds simple to achieve. Donna H. Ryan, M.D., co-chair of the committee who wrote the recent obesity guidelines says “it’s not just a matter of obese people deciding they’re going to eat less; it’s about the ability to resist food cues.”

Studies show that obese individuals have less ability to resist food cues. Stress, low blood sugar and other influences also play a part. In addition to the challenge, attempting to eat fewer calories increases the body’s appetite regulating signals. Especially when you start to lose
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weight, satiety is decreased. Dr. Ryan states, “In addition to the biological factors regulating our weight, societal factors also come into play, although they’re debated by experts.”

According to the AHA, examples of additional potential triggers for the obesity epidemic include:

- Increased availability of a variety of palatable and affordable foods
- Increased "screen time" – television, computers and smart phones
- Nutritional programming -- overweight and obese mothers who may be increasing their unborn child’s risk of obesity

Dr. Ryan adds, “If you have not had a friend, family member or colleague who has struggled with their weight and particularly if you haven't tried to lose weight yourself, then it’s easy for you to ascribe negative stereotypical traits to overweight and obese people. It's a lot like alcohol and drug addiction. Our society is more accepting of these conditions as a disease and less so for obesity.”

For further information regarding this article by the AHA, see www.heart.org or please contact Wendy Jefferson M.A.Ed. Wendy.jefferson@emory.edu at the Center for Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 12 Executive Park Drive NE, Atlanta, Georgia, 30329. You can also phone us at 404-727-3354 or visit our website at http://www.emory.edu/MSACD

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