

Obesity places greater burden on women

September 12, 2006

News

The number of North Americans who are overweight or obese has been rising steadily. This is an alarming trend — especially for women, who seem to be affected more negatively than men by weight problems.

'Relative to men, overweight women suffer a disproportionate amount of morbidity up to age 45 and then a much higher rate of mortality thereafter,' said Dr. Peter Muennig, lead author of a new study in the *American Journal of Public Health* and an assistant professor at the Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University in New York.

In essence, obesity not only causes more illness in women, it is more likely to cause premature death.

Muening's team found that the higher rate of disease among overweight and obese women is closely tied to lower health-related quality of life.

People with a low health-related quality of life have problems with mental illness, difficulty getting around, have a decreased ability to take care of themselves and may be in pain or discomfort. Overweight women, unfortunately, are more likely than their male counterparts to experience poor quality of life related to health.

In addition to physical health problems associated with weight problems, there is a greater stigma associated with being overweight or obese for women compared to men, which can be hazardous to a person's health.

'The messages that women receive about body image are stressful,' Muennig said.

That alone can be harmful. According to his study and others like it, increased levels of stress and anguish over a person's weight may raise the risk of undesired complications and premature death.

Research has verified that weight problems as a child or adolescent lead to higher disease rates in adulthood.

'We now know that chronic disease may be initiated in childhood with heart disease risk factors being identified in early childhood,' said Dr. Pat Crawford, adjunct professor and co-director of the Center for Weight and Health at the school of public health of the University of California, Berkeley.

Type 2 diabetes is also tied closely to obesity. It was primarily diagnosed in middle-aged people 20-30 years ago, but individuals of all ages can be vulnerable to diabetes.

'We are more aware of the risk of poor diet and sedentary lifestyle on early type 2 diabetes,' Crawford said.

Type 2 diabetes is one of the fastest growing diseases of childhood, but it can be prevented. Studies show that people at high risk for type 2 diabetes can prevent or delay onset of the disease by losing 5 to 7 percent of their body weight.

Because childhood obesity rates are at an all-time high, parents need to help their children make healthy lifestyle and diet choices. Parents also need to be careful about criticizing their children.

'Criticism can be very damaging to girls' self-esteem,' said Dr. Kirsten Davison, assistant professor in the School of Public Health at the State University of New York, Albany.

Research studies show that girls reject physical activity as they hit adolescence more often than boys. 'The rate of decline in activity is faster in girls,' Davison said.

'Parents really need to support and encourage their daughters to be active, not just in sports but in other activities like walking.'

Studies have shown that eating well-balanced meals and getting regular exercise can dramatically reduce the chances of being overweight and obese. At a time when obesity rates continue to climb, making minor changes in diet and fitness plans can go a long way.

Source: Dr. Jennifer Wider, MD, Society for Women's Health Research