

Obesity Epidemic Escalates: 6% increase from 1998 to 1999.

The CDC released startling statistics showing that even more Americans are becoming obese. . . and at an alarming rate.

Obesity is a critical public health issue affecting nearly 1 in 5 Americans today! Over 300,000 adults die of causes linked to obesity yearly, the CDC reports. Obesity increases the risk of many life-threatening diseases like heart disease, certain cancers, arthritis, respiratory diseases and others.

In the October 4, 2000 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA), the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that obesity rose nearly 6% in a single year between 1998 and 1999. This increase is shocking – representing a 57% increase since 1991! In 7 years between 1991 and 1998, obesity rates rose 5.9% (12.0% to 17.9%) which was reason for alarm, but new reports show a *one year increase of 5.7%* between 1998 and 1999.

Obesity is classified by using the Body Mass Index (BMI) to compute weight in kilograms divided by height in meters². An individual with a BMI of 30 or higher is considered obese. A normal BMI is between 20 – 24.9 and a BMI of 25 – 29.9 is considered overweight.*

The CDC reports that obesity increased dramatically from 17.9 in 1998 to 18.9 in 1999 representing this 5.6% increase in a single year. A rise in obesity was anticipated, but this magnitude is shocking. Within races, the highest prevalence of obesity was among African Americans (27.3%), followed by Hispanics (21.5%) and then Caucasians (17.7%). However, White Americans had the *greatest increase* – nearly 7% - in obesity between 1998 and 1999.

Obesity stems from an excess accumulation of fat and an imbalance of excess energy intake (food calories) and energy expended (physical activity). Reaching obese status does not occur overnight and the high prevalence of overweight Americans (BMI of 25 – 29.9) has been reported to be as high as 39.4% among men and 24.7% among women in 1994.

With the increase in sedentary lifestyles in the U.S. at home and in the workplace, and increased reliance on items of convenience like remote controls, computers and cars, individuals are not getting adequate physical activity to reach energy balance in burning off the calories they consume. This, in addition to the numerous high calorie, pre-packaged convenience foods currently available, is leading Americans to consume more calories than their bodies need each day. With the abundance of food choices, fast food restaurants and buffet-style dining facilities, the increased obesity rates are likely to continue.

This most recent and alarming increase in obesity draws attention to the critical need for a comprehensive public health plan to treat the obesity epidemic in the U.S. according to the CDC. Obesity is a major risk factor for many chronic diseases and not just a personal inconvenience of extra weight.

A comprehensive plan must be developed that incorporates an emphasis both on improved nutrition and increased physical activity in the equation. The CDC stresses the need for public health departments and communities to come together to develop effective educational and environmental approaches to this growing epidemic of obesity. While this task seems formidable, individuals and communities can work together to develop innovative approaches for the home, workplace and in the community to tackle this major health problem.

To achieve optimal health which includes maintaining a healthy weight, Americans should strive to incorporate the Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2000 in their lives and use available tools like the Food Guide Pyramid to guide their eating habits.

References:

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