

Obesity – we all have to act

The Health Column

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As a nation we are getting fatter and the most recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics are quite frightening.

These show that in 2011-12 (the latest information analysed), some 70% of males aged 18 years and over were overweight or obese, with 56% of females also falling into this category.

These overweight/obesity rates were up five and six percentage points respectively on the 1995 results.

We hear a lot about obesity but the reality is that people being overweight or obese may have significant health, social and economic impacts.

Being overweight or obese increases the risk of suffering from a range of health conditions, including coronary heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, some cancers, knee and hip problems, and sleep apnoea.

Only a few years ago, the total annual cost of obesity to Australia, including health system costs, loss of productivity costs and carers' costs, was estimated at around \$58 billion. And as more and more of us fall into the obese category, that figure is also going to rise.

The problem is not only in adults but more and more children are being diagnosed as being obese. Overweight and obesity in children is a major health concern. Studies have shown that once children become obese they are more likely to stay obese into adulthood and have an increased risk of developing both short and long-term health conditions, such as Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease.



Photo by Karen Barefoot | sxc.hu

In 2011-12, around a quarter of all Australian children aged 5-17 years (24% of boys and 27% of girls) were either overweight or obese according to measured Body Mass Index. Since 1995, the proportion of obese boys in the 5-12 year age group has increased significantly by three percentage points to 7%. For girls, there was a significant increase in the 13-17 year age group classified as overweight (up 6 percentage points to 18%).

While genetics may play a role in a person's propensity to become overweight or obese, the fundamental cause is an imbalance between energy consumed and energy expended – in other words we are eating too much.

This week in Australia's Healthy Weight Week (AHWW) which has been developed to help raise awareness of the importance of achieving and maintaining a healthy weight and a healthy lifestyle.

The move towards energy-dense diets and decreasing physical activity are two of the factors that have contributed to increases in rates of overweight and obesity. The recognition that what we eat is what we end up looking like is filtering through and in the United States a voluntary effort by the world's largest food and beverage companies to remove billions of calories from the products they sell has far exceeded its five-year goal.

In May 2010, 16 of the nation's biggest food and beverage companies, from Coca-Cola Co to Kraft Foods Group, pledged to remove 1 trillion calories from the US marketplace by 2012 and 1.5 trillion by 2015, compared with a 2007 baseline. In fact, as of 2012 they sold 6.4 trillion fewer calories. The obvious question is why were so many calories put into their products in the first place but notwithstanding this, it is a very positive sign that manufacturers are now recognising and trying to do something about the obesity epidemic.

Such voluntary programs are all well and good but we must take individual responsibility as well and Healthy Weight Week, an initiative of the Dietitians Association of Australia, is a good place to start.

Health professionals such as dietitians, doctors and pharmacists can provide advice and materials to help people want to lose weight or manage their weight.

Your local community pharmacy is your health destination and your Self Care pharmacist can give you more information about issues affecting your weight. Your local Self Care pharmacy also has a range of fact cards covering topics such as *Weight and health*, *Fat and cholesterol*, and *Fibre and bowel health* which can help you.

For the nearest location phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 or check the website www.psa.org.au and click on Self Care Pharmacy Finder.