



## OBESITY EDGING SMOKING AS NO. 1 PREVENTABLE KILLER OF AMERICANS

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*Just as McDonald's announced that it was phasing out its super-sized menu, a new study released by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says obesity may replace smoking as the number one cause of preventable death in the United States.*

According to the study, bad eating habits and lack of exercise caused 17 percent of the deaths in the United States in 2000 -- about 400,000 people. Tobacco use, currently the leading cause of preventable death in the U.S., killed 435,000 people.

"Americans need to understand that overweight and obesity are literally killing us," said Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson.

Studies show that about 15 percent of Americans under the age of 18 are overweight. In addition to lack of exercise and overeating, some health advocates blame fast-food television food ads and fewer gym classes in schools.

In adults the numbers for obesity are higher. According to the Health and Human Services Department, about 64 percent of Americans -- an estimated 129.6 million people -- are overweight or obese.

### **What is obesity and how does it harm our bodies?**

Obesity is an excessively high amount of body fat or adipose tissue -- tissue that contains fat cells -- in relation to lean body mass, or muscles. Doctors measure obesity using Body Mass Index, a mathematical formula in which an individual's body weight is divided by the square of his or her height.

People with a BMI of 25 percent to 29.9 percent are overweight, according to the CDC. Those with a BMI of 30 percent or more are obese.

A high BMI stresses the body's heart, bones and lungs and increases the risk of diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease and even some forms of cancer.

"It's not going to be people having heart attacks and strokes in their 70s and 80s; we're going to bring that down in the obese population to maybe the 50s and the 60s, or even maybe the 40s," said Dr. Francine Kaufman, a pediatric endocrinologist at Children's Hospital in Los Angeles.

African American and Hispanic children have a higher chance of being obese than other groups because of genetic and lifestyle factors, Kaufman said.

Doctors also worry that obese children and teens face discrimination from their peers.

"They also have low self-esteem," said pediatrician, Dr. Wendy Slusser. "And then of course, an obese child has a much higher risk for being an obese adult, and obese adults have been found to be discriminated in the job market and also in the college admission process."

### **Government efforts to combat obesity**

In response to the CDC's report, U.S. Food and Drug Administration said it would ask food manufacturers and some restaurants to label food more clearly so that customers know how many calories are in a serving.

Not only would restaurants have to clearly state the number of calories and amount of fat in each dish, but food packages would have to be easier to read and understand. Currently, a soda label might say that it contains 90 calories per serving, but there are 2.5 servings in the bottle. The new rules would eliminate the math need to figure out that the soda actually has 225 calories.

In addition, the government, along with the Ad Council, a non-profit organization that develops public service campaigns for government agencies, launched an advertising campaign aimed at encouraging Americans to eat less and get more exercise.

In one ad, two boys are playing on a beach. When one boy finds a belly in the sand, his friend asks, "What is that?" He replies, "Looks like someone's belly, he, probably lost it walking on the beach."

Not everyone is happy about the ads. Critics say the images could offend overweight people.

"The message to eat healthier and be more active is good, but to set it up in a way that makes overweight people look disgusting is highly insensitive, stigmatizing and not necessary," Kelly Brownell, director of the Yale Center for Eating and Weight Disorders told USA Today.

The ads are combined with a Web site, [smallsteps.gov](http://smallsteps.gov), created by the Health Department to encourage healthy lifestyles.

### **"Cheeseburger bill"**

Meanwhile, the House of Representatives decided March 10 that the fast-food industry should not take the blame for America's expanding waistline.

By a 276-139 vote, House lawmakers passed a so-called "cheeseburger bill" to protect restaurants from lawsuits by consumers who claim their food made them fat. One such case was brought unsuccessfully last year by a group of New York teen-agers who blamed McDonald's for their obesity.

Such suits, said Michigan Republican Rep. Mike Rogers, are "not about health, but about money" for lawyers. The bill prohibits many obesity or weight-related claims against the food

industry, but allows claims to go forward if state or federal laws had been broken and as a result, a person gained weight.

For the bill to become law, it must pass the Senate and be signed by President Bush.

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