



Obesity

Recent national surveys in the UK have reported that:

- 22% adults in England are obese (>30 BMI), 66% are overweight or obese¹
- One in four men and one in five women are obese¹
- Morbid obesity (>40 BMI) increased in both men (0.2% to 0.8%) and women (1.4% to 2.6%) between 1993 and 2002¹
- one in ten 6yr olds and one in six 15yr olds are obese¹
- the prevalence of obesity in children aged 2-10 years increased from 9.6% in 1995 to 13.7% in 2003²

England has some of the worst figures in Europe and also demonstrates some of the worst trends in the acceleration of obesity: in the majority of European countries the prevalence of obesity has increased between 10–40% in the last ten years, but in England it has more than doubled, among children as well as adults.¹

The Chief Medical Officer has referred to obesity as “a health time bomb” that needs defusing.³ Projections suggest one-third of adults will be obese by 2020. However, given the rapid acceleration in childhood obesity, predicted prevalence amongst children will more likely be in excess of 50% by 2020.

There is a nine-year reduction in life expectancy amongst obese patients, the risk being markedly amplified if they also smoke. Around 14% of cancer deaths in men and 20% in women are attributed to obesity.

In common with most public health problems the impact of obesity mirrors many other health inequalities. Men and women working in unskilled manual occupations are over four times as likely as those in professional employment to be classified as morbidly obese.¹

Children who are Asian are four times more likely to be obese than those who are white. Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi men have relatively low levels of obesity measured by BMI, but 41% of Indian men are classed as centrally obese compared with 28% of men in the general population.¹

Amongst women, there are also important differences between ethnic groups: in 1999 obesity was 50% higher than the national average amongst Black Caribbean women and 25% higher amongst Pakistani women.

World

The World Health Organisation (WHO) predicts that the world will “see a one-third increase in the loss of healthy life as a result of overweight and obesity over the next 20 years, with the number of global deaths rising from three million to five million each year.” WHO describes an escalating global epidemic of overweight and obesity that is taking over many parts of the world. In their view, “If immediate action is not taken, millions will suffer from an array of serious health disorders.”⁴ See www.who.int/nut/obs.htm.



In 1995, according to the WHO, there were an estimated 200 million obese adults worldwide and another 18 million children aged under five classified as overweight.⁵ However, by 2000, the number of obese adults had increased to over 300 million.

This obesity epidemic is not restricted to industrialised societies. Some 115 million people suffer from obesity-related problems in the non-industrialised world. For example:

- Over three-quarters of men living in cities in Samoa are obese;
- There are as many overweight as underweight adults in Ghana;
- 44% of women in the Cape Peninsula of South Africa are obese.⁶

1. Health Select Committee Report, Obesity. 2004
2. Audit Commission, Tackling Childhood Obesity – First Steps. 2006
3. Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer 2002, Dept of Health
4. World Health Organisation www.who.int/nut/obs.htm
5. World Health Organisation www.who.int/nut
6. International Obesity Taskforce, www.iof.org