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A Weighty Issue

Obesity is a growing problem in the U.S., but simple lifestyle changes can help diminish your chances of becoming a part of this deadly epidemic.

The obesity crisis in America has led to an entire nation affected by preventable disease, poor work performance and growing health care costs. The problem is a complex one, with many factors contributing to the more than one-third of U.S. adults who are obese—a number, say experts, which will continue to grow.

"According to the latest government statistics, 78 million Americans are currently obese and many experts believe that by 2030 half of our population will be obese," says Mark Mincolla, Ph.D., a natural healthcare practitioner at Santi Holistic Healing in Cohasset, Massachusetts, who notes that the general criteria for obesity is defined as a 5'9" adult weighing more than 202 pounds.

Obesity Facts*

- More than one-third of U.S. adults are obese.
- Obesity is higher among adults ages 40 to 59 (39.5%) than among younger adults ages 20 to 39 (30.3%) and adults 60 or older (35.4%).
- The medical costs for people who are obese are $1,429 higher than those individuals who are normal weight.
- Obesity-related conditions include some of the leading causes of preventable death, such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and certain types of cancer.
- Non-Hispanic blacks have the highest age-adjusted rates of obesity (47.8%), followed by Hispanics (42.5%), non-Hispanic whites (32.6%) and non-Hispanic Asians (10.8%).

*Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

In addition to expanding the American waistline, obesity is also affecting the country's bottom line. "Obesity results in a direct financial cost of $152 billion annually and the annual cost of obesity-related loss of productivity is $30 billion per year," says Mincolla.

Here, experts weigh in on what causes the condition and how you can keep from packing on the pounds.

Cause and Effect

Obesity is generally caused by a combination of factors, including inactivity, unhealthy eating habits, genetics and lack of sleep, says Franci Cohen, a certified nutritionist, personal trainer and CEO and owner of Fuel Fitness in Brooklyn, New York. "Although there are many contributing variables to this epidemic, the bottom line is simple: an imbalance between calories consumed and calories expended," says Cohen. Hence, if the amount of calories consumed is greater than the amount of calories expended, weight gain will occur.

The fundamental cause of obesity is eating too many calories, especially those from foods with high levels of fat and starch, combined with a lack of calorie-burning exercise. "Obesity rates are on the rise because of an overconsumption of prepackaged foods and the fact that many Americans have adopted a sedentary lifestyle," says Mincolla, noting that 112,000 deaths per year are related to obesity. The disease also increases an individual's risk for additional health issues, including sleep apnea, endometrial cancer, colon cancer, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, liver disease, hypertension, stroke and respiratory disease. What's more, if you tend to store added weight around your midsection (the area closest to vital organs), your health risks are significantly higher. "For those who are obese, the likelihood of death before the age of 55 is nearly doubled, compared to those who are not obese," says Mincolla.

Recognizing Risk Factors

Experts point to excess sugar and a lack of exercise as significant risk factors for obesity. According to JJ Virgin, author of The Virgin Diet Cookbook and a certified nutrition specialist whose clients include Ben Stiller and Janeane Garofalo, sugar consumption has skyrocketed among Americans. "It's not just soda and candy. Sugar is in many processed foods as a preservative or flavor additive," she says, noting that too much sugar can lead to obesity as well as a host of other issues. "Obesity can adversely affect self-esteem and lead to more sick days at work."

According to Mincolla, it's important to eat plenty of fruits and vegetables and limit your consumption of high-starch foods (think: potatoes, rice, bread and pasta) to three-fourths cup per day. "Calories derived from high-starch carbohydrates trigger the body's production of insulin, which program cells to store fat," explains Mincolla. "On the other hand, calories from green vegetables and protein, such as poultry, fish and egg whites,

> Get up and move throughout your day. Make it a habit every 50 minutes. Or, use your lunch break to grab a local spin class or run around the scenic side of town, then eat your lunch when you return.

What's more, the condition can negatively affect an individual's performance on the job or in the classroom. "Studies show lower scores in all subjects among obese school children as opposed to their slimmer counterparts," says Cohen. "The findings were linked to various factors in both the brain and body, and point to the fact that the body operates best when not weighed down with extraneous fat." An inactive lifestyle also plays a role. According to Cohen, the increase in technology, including smartphones and video games, encourages both kids and adults to remain sedentary instead of engaging in physical activity.

Taking Control

So how can nail techs, who (like most Americans) have sedentary jobs, stave off obesity? First, examine your diet. Are you so busy juggling clients that you grab a prepackaged midday meal or snack on junk food throughout the day? The healthier approach is to plan ahead. "People with sedentary jobs are not destined for obesity. It's all about planning," says Cohen, who suggests brown bagging your lunch. "Pack a healthy lunch and some snacks the night before and bring them with you to work. Try using last night's leftover chicken in a salad for lunch or slice an apple and pair it with almond butter for a healthy but satisfying snack."

encourage the body to burn fat." Virgin agrees, saying "Stick to whole, unprocessed foods, including lean protein, and load up on leafy veggies, high-fiber foods and healthy fats, such as coconut and avocado."

In addition to eating right, you need to move your body, too. Exercise will help whittle your waist as well as improve your mood, boost energy levels and promote better sleep. Even moderate activity helps, says Mincolla, who suggests a 30-minute walk at a moderate to brisk pace four times per week. And be sure to get physical at work, too. "Get up and move throughout your day," says Virgin. "Make it a habit every 50 minutes, or so, to get up from your desk." Or, if you're feeling ambitious, try something more challenging. "Use your lunch break to grab a local spin class or run around the scenic side of town, then eat your lunch at your workstation when you return," says Cohen. "The name of the game is preparation and creativity. The more you have of each, the less likely you are to enter the obesity danger zone."

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