

## **Lose Pounds, Gain Years: The Link Between Weight Loss and Longevity**

If you're like most people, you've become a perpetual weight lifter. Unfortunately, the extra pounds you're pumping aren't made of iron; they consist of a much softer material—your own body. Today, more than 60 percent of Americans are either overweight (up to 19 percent over their ideal body weight) or obese (20 percent or more over their ideal body weight). From 1991 to 2000 alone, the numbers of obese people in this country grew 60 percent. So while you may be in good company, it's difficult to take comfort in these numbers. Particularly since the weight-gaining trend shows no signs of abating.

Why the overeating epidemic? Theories abound, but you don't have to look far to see why losing weight is as challenging as a salmon's upstream swim. One clear contributor is an explosion of cheap food, made available by technological innovation. Another is the evolution of work that requires less and less activity. Long gone are the days where we got paid for jobs that left us as physically exhausted as a two-hour workout in the gym. Quite the opposite. Today we have drive-in everything, ranging from dry cleaning to hamburgers to prescription drugs. You don't even have to move more than a finger to change the channel, lower the volume, or turn the lights off. Add to that other influences, like television, computers, elevators, moving airport walkways, and car-centered urban planning, and you have a set-up for weight gain, says Roland Sturm, senior economist at RAND, a Washington, DC nonprofit think tank.

“People respond to the incentives in their environment,” says Sturm. “If you make television cheaper and provide more channels, you should not be surprised if people

spend more time watching it. If it becomes a hassle to ride your bike because there's no space for bicycles, you should not be surprised if people drive instead.” And if you see food everywhere you look. . . . well, you should not be surprised if it's difficult to resist eating.

The impact, however, is stunning, so stunning that Sturm repeatedly checked the results of his 2002 report comparing the health costs of obesity, smoking, and drinking. His telephone survey of 10,000 people found that obesity affects numerous chronic medical conditions significantly more than current or past smoking or problem drinking. Overall, it equaled the effects of 20 years' aging. Measured in dollars, the health costs associated with obesity are a mind-boggling \$117 billion a year. That figure doesn't even take into account the cost to your quality of life—your hampered ability to perform daily tasks, to move without pain, to feel your age or younger.

Obesity is so huge a problem that hard-won gains in public health prevention efforts—fewer people smoking, more people getting cancer screenings or physical exams, for example—are at risk of being completely cancelled out by increasing weight gain, especially for Americans over 50 who put on more pounds as their metabolism and physical activity slows.

If you're overweight or obese, you join the ranks of millions of Americans at increased risk for diabetes, hypertension, coronary heart disease, certain types of cancer, joint or sleep problems, and a whole host of other health problems. Keep your weight within a healthy range, however, and you stand a much better chance of living longer with a better quality of life. Among 100 participants in the Centenarian Study led by

Harvard Medical School researchers, 99 percent were not obese, and 80 percent maintained a steady weight throughout their lives.

Another major study, the Nurses' Health Study, which followed 120,000 nurses since 1976, found that obese women have a greatly increased risk of premature death compared to lean women. Obese nurses were four times more likely to die of coronary heart disease and twice as likely to die from cancer. But it's not just the obese that are at risk, says Walter Willett, M.D., chairman of the Department of Nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health and a leader of the Nurses' Health Study. "We've been able to document that there is a step-wise increase in risk with increasing weight after age 20," says Willett, author of *Eat, Drink, and Be Healthy: The Harvard Medical School Guide to Healthy Eating*. "Even a 10- to 15-pound weight gain, which has become the norm at midlife, can double or triple the risk of diabetes, for example."

Those first few pounds appear to be a harbinger of things to come. "They tell us that something is out of balance in what we're eating and how much we're exercising," says Willett. "If we don't do something about it at that point, an eight-pound weight gain will become a 10- or 16-pound weight gain down the road and keep going up."

Tempting though it may be to throw up your arms in despair, there is a silver lining here. Many benefits of losing weight are almost immediate. According to Willett, you can reduce your risk of diabetes nearly 80 percent within a year of losing weight. Blood cholesterol levels and blood pressure readings improve quickly, too, though it may take a number of years to translate into a reduction in the risk for heart attacks and cancer.

Of course, you've likely known the benefits of weight loss for some time. The problem is *how* to get the job done. So here, instead of a prescriptive diet, are a few guidelines for traversing this territory with more confidence than you may have been able to summon in the past.