

## The problem

Overweight and obesity occur when a person gains excess weight to the point that it starts to endanger their health – both in the long and short term. Without periods of increased calories intake and/or decreased physical activity, individuals will not gain weight, no matter what their genetic make up.

Changes in lifestyle over the last two decades – observed in many countries – are likely to have contributed to trends in obesity. Calorie intakes may have increased – portion sizes have increased and snacking, sugary drinks and eating out are more common – and people, on average, are less active – with sedentary jobs, walking less, watching more TV and less likely to play sport.

### KEY FACTS

#### on obesity

- Obesity reduces life expectancy on average by 9 years and is responsible for 9000 premature deaths each year.
- Overweight and obesity increase the risk of a wide range of diseases and illnesses, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes and some cancers.
- The prevalence of obesity has trebled since the 1980s. 22% of men and 23.5% of women are now obese and well over half of all adults are either overweight or obese – almost 24 million adults.
- Overweight and obesity are also increasing in children. Almost 17% of children aged 2-15 years are obese (Health Survey for England 2002).
- There are social class differences – 16% of “professional” males and females are obese compared to 23% of males and 29% of females classified as “unskilled manual”.
- Most evidence suggests that the main reason for the rising prevalence is a combination of less active lifestyles and changes in eating patterns.
- Obesity has a substantial human cost by contributing to the onset of disease and premature death. It also has serious financial consequences for the NHS and for the economy.

#### What works?

Obesity is not an easy problem to tackle. The best long-term approach is prevention, particularly in childhood. Critical to this is improving diet – including reducing intakes of fat and added sugars – and increasing physical activity levels. Action needs to take a lifecourse approach – starting from birth (breastfed babies may be less likely to develop obesity later in childhood).

Even a modest weight loss can significantly improve the health of people who are already overweight or obese. The NHS provides treatment for obesity, ranging from general support and advice on diet, physical activity and behaviours to drug treatments and onward referral for specialist help.

### So what's happening?

The **Food and Health Action Plan** and the **Activity Coordination Team** will be of direct relevance to the prevention and management of obesity and provide the overall Strategy

- **Food and Health Action Plan** – cross government action, led by Department of Health –to improve public health through better diet.
- **Activity Coordination Team** – cross government action led by Departments of Health and Culture, Media and Sport – to increase mass participation in physical activity.

Examples of current action which will help tackle overweight and obesity:

- **Breastfeeding** – action to encourage more women to breastfeed and to continue for at least six months.
- **Reform of the Welfare Food Scheme** – to ensure children in poverty have access to a healthy diet and increased support for breastfeeding.
- **5 A DAY programme** – including the National School Fruit Scheme, which will provide a free piece of fruit each school day to over 2 million children from 2005; local community initiatives and 5 A DAY logo– to increase access to and consumption of fruit and vegetables.
- **Food in Schools Programme** – promoting a “whole school approach” and encouraging greater access to healthier choices within schools.
- **Work with the Food industry** to address the amount of fat, salt and added sugar in the diet (with the Food Standards Agency).
- **Local Exercise Activity Pilots** – to test effectiveness of different PCT led community approaches to increasing physical activity levels.
- **Pedometers** – the Government has distributed 10,000 pedometers to 110 PCTs in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas to encourage increased walking.
- **New GP contract** – practices will be required to offer relevant health promotion advice to patients.

### **What next?**

The choice of your lifestyle including diet and physical activity make a difference to your health.

As part of the Government's consultation on improving people's health, we would like to know more about:

Do you think that people know that obesity increases the risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease and some cancers?

If not, what is the best way to help people understand the risk to health and who should provide the help?

If you think that people do understand that obesity and excessive weight gain is harmful to health why do people find it difficult to maintain a healthy weight?

What key actions do you think are needed to help people maintain a healthy weight and from whom?

