



The Australian and New Zealand Obesity Society

OBESITY IN AUSTRALIAN ADULTS: ASSOCIATED CONSEQUENCES

Obesity is the excessive accumulation of body fat to an extent that health is impaired.¹ The health, psychosocial and economic consequences of overweight and obesity are substantial, not only in terms of premature death and health care, but also in terms of disability and a diminished quality of life.

HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

Obesity is a serious medical condition, associated with a wide range of chronic and life-threatening conditions and severe health complications.

Table 1. Health risks associated with obesity.

Greatly increased risk	Moderately increased risk	Slightly increased risk
Type 2 diabetes	Heart Disease	Certain cancers (post-menopausal breast cancer, colon cancer)
High blood pressure	Gallbladder disease	Reproductive hormone abnormalities
Sleep apnoea	Osteoarthritis (knees)	Polycystic ovary syndrome
Insulin resistance	High uric acid levels and gout	Impaired fertility
Breathlessness	Abnormal lipid / body fat profile	Low back pain due to obesity
	Endometrial cancer	Increased anaesthetic risk
		Foetal defects associated with maternal obesity

Source: Adapted from WHO, 2000 ²

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES

The psychological health of overweight and obese individuals is reduced.³ The psychological consequences of obesity can range from low self-esteem and body image discontent to clinical depression. The obese are more likely to have anxiety, depression and impaired social interaction. The effect of these is impaired quality of life.^{4,5}

Age and gender are two important risk factors in the association between overweight and psychological health. Being younger and being female is associated with a higher risk of psychological suffering. A further important risk factor for impaired psychological health is the degree of overweight. The problems of the severely or morbidly overweight or obese has been described in terms of:

- A lack of self-confidence,
- A sense of isolation from the failure of others to understand the frustration of a weight problem, and
- The humiliation arising from the practicalities of living in a world designed for a smaller frame.⁵

SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES

Society has a very negative view of overweight and obesity. Overweight is considered unattractive, unhealthy and least acceptable in social circles. Associated with obesity are perceived negative character traits, such as greedy, lazy, of lower intelligence, and socially isolated.⁵

Negative attitudes towards the obese can lead to discrimination in many areas of life, including

education, employment, health care and social relationships. This can lead to further social isolation and poor physical and psychological health.

ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

Obesity and its associated illnesses create an enormous financial burden on individuals and society.

The costs of obesity can be divided into three main categories⁶:

Direct costs - the cost to the individual and community arising as a direct result of treatment.

Intangible costs - the cost to the individual in terms of ill health and reduced quality of life.

Indirect costs - the cost to the rest of society in terms of lost production due to work-related absenteeism and premature death.

Obesity is a health crisis that is costing the Australian government up to \$1.5 billion a year in direct health costs.⁷ In 1989, the direct cost of obesity in Australia was estimated to be \$464 million or around 2% of national health care costs.⁸ Indirect costs associated with worker absenteeism and premature death amounted to an additional \$272 million.⁹ Updated estimates for Australia in 1995/96 suggest that the true cost of obesity may be between \$680-\$1239 million.¹⁰

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