

Obesity More Critical Health Issue Than Smoking

According to a new study, obesity is now a bigger problem than smoking in terms of quality of life, morbidity and mortality. I'm not surprised. More than one third of the population is obese, and one third is overweight. There are more overweight and obese people than there are smokers, so the impact is higher.

The study showed that smokers had a higher mortality rate than obese people, but that obese people lose more quality of life years due to disability and limitations on their activity. During the 15-year study period, smoking decreased 18.5%, while the percentage of the population who became obese increased by 85%.

We spend incredible sums of money making sure that people know the dangers of smoking; obviously these programs have been effective. We have not eliminated smoking, but there are fewer smokers, and almost everyone has been exposed to some type of programming that has informed them of the effects of smoking on health. We invest in trying to prevent people, particularly kids, from starting to smoke; and getting people who do smoke to quit. It's time to start allocating similar resources to constructive approaches to the obesity epidemic.

The place to start is to tell people the truth about why they are overweight - it is not genes, bad luck, or slow metabolism. It is the food choices they make daily. In order for things to get better, people must stop consuming addictive, nutrient-deficient, high-calorie foods. We don't tell cigarette smokers to smoke shorter cigarettes, or to talk to their friends between puffs in order to reduce their smoking habit; we teach them strategies for quitting and staying away from cigarettes.

Obese people need similar strategies; they need to get the bad food out of their homes and offices. As a society, we need to get the bad food out of the schools, and create work environments that help people to stay compliant, rather than tempting them constantly with the wrong foods.

This is where you can make a huge difference - start with yourself - sanitize your environment and set an example for others. And, get involved in projects like improving school food that can help to address this problem before it gets worse.

Haomiao Jia, PhD, Erica I. Lubetkin, MD, MPH Trends in Quality-Adjusted Life-Years Lost Contributed by Smoking and Obesity: Does the Burden of Obesity Overweigh the Burden of Smoking? Am J Prevent Med Feb 2010

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