

The Medical Facts of Obesity

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By Stephen F. Wintermeyer, MD, MPH

In 1998, the federal National Institutes of Health (NIH) published the Clinical Guidelines of the Identification, Evaluation and Treatment of Overweight and Obesity in Adults. The report highlighted the widespread nature of obesity and its significant medical effects. The NIH estimates that 300,000 deaths in the U.S. each year are due to obesity related illnesses. Obesity ranks second only to smoking as a leading cause of preventable deaths in the United States.

Obesity is now determined by a measure called the body mass index (BMI). BMI is based on height and weight. Two common formulae for BMI are the following:

BMI = kilograms/meters² (metric system)

BMI = pounds X (704.5)/meters² (English system)

A normal BMI is considered to be between 18.5-24.9. Underweight is defined as a BMI <18.5. Overweight is defined as a BMI 24.9-29.9, and obesity is a BMI >30. Approximately 55% of the U.S. population of adults meet the criteria of overweight or obesity.

Obesity related illnesses include type II diabetes, hypertension, lipid disorders, coronary heart disease, carpal tunnel syndrome and certain cancers, such as breast, endometrial, prostate, and colon. A recent study published in the New England Journal of Medicine showed that the optimal BMI in terms of mortality is 24 in men and 23 in women. As the BMI gets further away from these values, either higher or lower, mortality increases.

From a medical viewpoint, the goal for an individual who is overweight or obese should be a 10% weight reduction accomplished by losing 1-2 pounds per week over six months. This can usually be done by reducing caloric intake by 500-1000 calories per day. Exercise is beneficial primarily in maintaining weight loss, not causing the weight loss initially. For those individuals with a BMI >30, medication may be indicated to assist in weight loss. Two new

agents for weight loss include sibutramine, an appetite suppressant, and orlist, which blocks fat absorption in the intestine. In a very small number of people, surgery may be indicated.

If you are concerned about your health, one thing to do is calculate your BMI. Measure your height and weight. Using the equations above you can use a calculator to determine your BMI. If you can get on the Internet, the NIH has a BMI calculator on their website (see below). If your BMI is high, you will have plenty of company. But remember, for your health, it is worth doing something about.

For more information, go to the NIH website at <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/guidelines/obesity>.