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Obesity: The Epidemic, Disease and Global Policy Implications

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Editorial Note

Obesity is a worldwide epidemic with recent literature suggesting that the impact on the global domestic product (GDP) is $2.0 trillion USD. As morbidity, mortality and costs continue to rise; efforts must be made to understand the impact of the disease. In many developed countries, the prevalence of obesity is more than 30%. Some countries have sought to develop policy initiatives to tackle the disease, but often policy makers have a rudimentary understanding of the disease. Obesity is a disease in which a myriad of factors play a role in its incidence including behavior (diet quality, physical activity, sleep and stress), genetics and hormonal regulation. It is important to understand the complexity of obesity to work to develop strategies to prevent and treat persons who struggle with it. This presentation will define obesity, illustrate prevalence, and discuss current research which helps us to understand the complex physiology of the disease. We will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of policies that have been developed throughout the world to target obesity. Additionally, we will also explore barriers to access to obesity care.

Obesity is the next major epidemiologic challenge facing today's doctors, with the annual allocation of healthcare resources for the disease and related comorbidities projected to exceed $150 billion in the United States. The incidence of obesity has risen in the United States over the past 30 years; 60% of adults are currently either obese or overweight. Obesity is associated with a higher incidence of a number of diseases, including diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. Consumption of fast food, trans fatty acids (TFAs), and fructose—combined with increasing portion sizes and decreased physical activity—has been implicated as a potential contributing factor in the obesity crisis.The use of Body Mass Index (BMI) alone is of limited utility for predicting adverse cardiovascular outcomes, but the utility of this measure may be strengthened when combined with waist in circumference and other anthropomorphic measurements.Certa public health initiatives have helped to identify and reduce some of the factors contributing to obesity. In New York City and Denmark, for example, such initiatives have succeeded in passing legislation to reduce or remove TFAs from residents' diets. The obesity epidemic will likely change practice for gastroenterologists, as shifts will be seen in the incidence of obesity-related gastrointestinal disorders, disease severity, and the nature of comorbidities. The experience gained with previous epidemiologic problems such as smoking should help involved parties to expand needed health initiatives and increase the likelihood of preventing future generations from suffering the consequences of obesity.

Obesity Epidemiology

Numerous comorbid conditions have been associated with obesity, including type 2 diabetes, hypertension, hypercholesterolemia, hypertriglyceridemia, and non-alcoholic fatty liver disease. As a result of these comorbidities, the medical costs directly related to obesity are difficult to determine, but a conservative estimate would place the healthcare burden for obesity at approximately $150 billion per year in the United States.4–6 The increase in mortality among obese individuals is likely related to comorbid conditions, rather than obesity per se; because of their various obesity-associated conditions, obese patients present challenging and complex issues in medical and surgical intensive care units. In the current debate over healthcare reform in the United States, no proposed solution can reasonably ignore or minimize the role that obesity plays with regard to economic and health consequences.

While obesity is clearly a major public health issue in the United States, the increased prevalence of obesity is not limited to this country; indeed, obesity is now a global epidemic. Over the past 10 years, the World Health Organization (WHO) has recognized the increasing number of people who are overweight or obese, and attention is now being given to the global implications associated with this trend. In an analysis of the leading causes of global mortality and burden of disease, obesity and being overweight were among the top 10 causes for each The presence of a worldwide epidemic is suggested by the fact that in various regions of the world—North America, Central America, South America, most of Western Europe, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe—the majority of countries report that at least 40% of their population between the ages of 45 and 59 years are overweight or obese

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