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Health Risks of Being Overweight

Weighing too much may increase a person's risk for developing many health problems. A person who is overweight (BMI is greater than 25) or obese (BMI is greater than 30) may be at risk for:

- Type 2 Diabetes
- Heart Disease and Stroke
- Cancer
- Sleep Apnea
- Osteoarthritis
- Gallbladder Disease
- Fatty Liver Disease

Type 2 Diabetes

What is it?

Type 2 diabetes used to be called adult-onset diabetes or noninsulin-dependent diabetes. It is the most common type of diabetes in the U.S. Type 2 diabetes is a disease in which blood sugar levels are above normal. High blood sugar is a major cause of early death, heart disease, kidney disease, stroke, and blindness.

How is it linked to being overweight?

More than 80 percent of people with type 2 diabetes are overweight. It is not known exactly why people who are overweight are more likely to suffer from this disease. It may be that being overweight causes cells to change, making them less effective at using sugar from the blood. This then puts stress on the cells that produce insulin (a hormone that carries sugar from the blood to cells) and makes them gradually fail.

Heart Disease and Stroke

What is it?

Heart disease means that the heart and circulation (blood flow) are not functioning normally. A person with heart disease may suffer from a heart attack, congestive heart failure, sudden cardiac death, angina (chest pain), or abnormal heart rhythm. During a stroke, blood and oxygen do not flow normally to the brain, possibly causing paralysis or death. Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the U.S., and stroke is the third leading cause.

How is it linked to being overweight?

People who are overweight are more likely to suffer from high blood pressure, high levels of triglycerides (blood fats) and LDL cholesterol (a fat-like substance often called the "bad cholesterol"), and low levels of HDL cholesterol (the "good cholesterol"). These are all risk factors for heart disease and stroke. In addition, people with more body fat have higher blood levels of substances that cause inflammation. Inflammation in blood vessels and throughout the body may raise heart disease risk.

Cancer

What is it?

Cancer occurs when cells in one part of the body, such as the colon, grow abnormally or out of control and possibly spread to other parts of the body, such as the liver. Cancer is the second leading cause of death in the U.S.

How is it linked to being overweight?

Being overweight may increase the risk of developing several types of cancer, including cancers of the colon, esophagus, and kidney. Overweight is also linked with uterine and postmenopausal breast cancer in women. Gaining weight during adult life increases the risk for several of these cancers. Being overweight also may increase the risk of dying from some cancers. It is not known exactly how being overweight increases cancer risk. It may be that fat cells make hormones that affect cell growth and lead to cancer. Also, eating or physical activity habits that may lead to being overweight may also contribute to cancer risk.

Sleep Apnea

What is it?

Sleep apnea is a condition in which a person stops breathing for short periods during the night. A person who has sleep apnea may suffer from daytime sleepiness, difficulty concentrating, and even heart failure.

How is it linked to being overweight?

The risk for sleep apnea is higher for people who are overweight. A person who is overweight may have more fat stored around his or her neck. This may make the airway smaller. A smaller airway can make breathing difficult, loud (snoring), or stop altogether. In addition, fat stored in the neck and throughout the body can produce substances that cause inflammation. Inflammation in the neck may be a risk factor for sleep apnea.

Osteoarthritis

What is it?

Osteoarthritis is a common joint disorder. With osteoarthritis, the joint bone and cartilage (tissue that protects joints) wear away. Osteoarthritis most often affects the joints of the knees, hips, and lower back.

How is it linked to being overweight?

Extra weight may place extra pressure on joints and cartilage, causing them to wear away. In addition, people with more body fat may have higher blood levels of substances that cause inflammation. Inflammation at the joints may raise the risk for osteoarthritis.

Gallbladder Disease

What is it?

Gallstones are clusters of solid material that form in the gallbladder. They are made mostly of cholesterol and can sometimes cause abdominal or back pain.

How is it linked to being overweight?

People who are overweight have a higher risk for developing gallbladder disease and gallstones. They may produce more cholesterol, a risk factor for gallstones. Also, people who are overweight may have an enlarged gallbladder, which may not work properly.

Fatty Liver Disease

What is it?

Fatty liver disease occurs when fat builds up in the liver cells and causes injury and inflammation in the liver. It can sometimes lead to severe liver damage, cirrhosis (build-up of scar tissue that blocks proper blood flow in the liver), or even liver failure. Fatty liver disease is like alcoholic liver damage, but it is not caused by alcohol and can occur in people who drink little or no alcohol.

How is it linked to being overweight?

People who have diabetes or “pre-diabetes” (when blood sugar levels are higher than normal but not yet in the diabetic range) are more likely to have fatty liver disease than people without these conditions. And people who are overweight are more likely to have diabetes. It is not known why some people who are overweight or diabetic get fatty liver and others do not.

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