

Obesity in men: a major problem for Europe

EMHF Fact sheet

- In countries across Europe, between 10% and 20% of men and 10% and 25% of women are classified as obese
- In these European countries, the prevalence of obesity has increased by between 10% and 40% in the last 10 years
- The most dramatic increase in obesity levels has been seen in the UK, where they have almost doubled since 1980
- Indeed, the majority of men in the UK are now too heavy for their health – 60% are defined medically as overweight and around 20% as obese
- UK figures also reveal that, although there seem to be more women who are obese than men, a higher proportion of men are overweight. This may be explained by a faster growth in the numbers of overweight men than in women
- Obesity is classified as a disease in its own right, and this is especially true of the ‘apple’ distribution of fat, which affects the abdominal organs. This type of obesity is linked very strongly to increased risk of stroke, heart attack and other cardiac problems, and to Type 2 diabetes. When men do put on weight, they tend to acquire this ‘apple’ shape
- Type 2 diabetes, which used to be known as ‘non-insulin dependent diabetes’, may be part of the Metabolic Syndrome, a cluster of symptoms that in itself may lead to cardiovascular disease. The prevalence of Type 2 diabetes is increasing, particularly among Asian populations
- Other, potentially fatal, complications that can be caused by obesity include gallbladder disease and certain types of cancers, including prostate and colorectal cancers
- Obesity also confers the risk of a number of non-fatal, but potentially limiting complications. These include respiratory difficulties and musculo-skeletal problems, skin conditions and infertility
- It’s estimated that between 2% and 8% of total sick care costs in Western societies are attributable to obesity – a figure that is comparable, in some cases, to the cost of cancer care. It is also a figure that is set to rise
- Children throughout Europe are increasingly becoming overweight. In the UK, for example, around 15% of teenagers and 12% of young children are defined as obese
- Figures from selected European countries reveal that greater numbers of both boys and girls seem to be becoming overweight. Although overall figures are similar, there are individual variations – in Italy, Hungary and Slovakia, there are higher numbers of overweight and obese boys than there are girls

- There are also growing reports that Type 2 diabetes is becoming more frequent among teenagers
- People who are obese or overweight suffer prejudice, ridicule and discrimination. Many have to cope with significant mental distress – anxiety, depression and reduced self-esteem are common findings among this group
- Many doctors and other health care professionals have not been sufficiently trained in managing obesity and weight problems. In many cases, overweight people tend to be treated only when a comorbidity is present – that is, when it is too late
- Experts believe that rising levels of obesity are usually caused by Western lifestyles – that is, a combination of convenient and affordable high-fat diets plus a less-active life (desk jobs, labour-saving devices, cars and remote controls)
- Other factors that increase the risk of becoming obese include having overweight or obese parents and gaining excess weight during the teenage years or early 20s. Education and lifestyle interventions during these vulnerable years are therefore of fundamental importance

The EMHF: tackling inequalities in men's health across Europe

The EMHF is an independent, non-profit-making, non-governmental organisation that aims to raise the profile of men's health at both a pan-European level and within individual countries. It encourages Europe-wide national, local and regional organisations (both governmental and non-governmental) to include men's issues in their health policies and practices. It also aims to improve delivery of health services to men and to influence men's health-related behaviours.

European Men's Health Forum
 Rue de l'Industrie 11, B1000, Brussels,
 Belgium
 email: office@emhf.org
 web: www.emhf.org

