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## **Obesity becoming a No. 1 killer**

**Obesity and inactivity are killing almost as many Americans as tobacco, a report shows.**

**BY SHARI RUDAVKSY**

Overeating and inactivity will likely soon overtake tobacco as the leading cause of preventable death in the United States, says a report in today's Journal of the American Medical Association.

From 1990 to 2000, the number of deaths attributable to poor diets and a sedentary lifestyle has increased by a third, making these habits responsible for 400,000 deaths, up by 100,000 over the 10 years, researchers from the Centers for Disease Control found.

Tobacco was the No. 1 killer with 435,000 deaths in 2000, but its lead narrowed considerably from 1990, as obesity rates soared and tobacco use slowly decreased, the study found. Tobacco-related deaths climbed by less than 9 percent during the decade, from 400,000 to 435,000.

"Our worst fears were confirmed," said Dr. Julie Gerberding, CDC director and a study author. "Obesity has got to be job No. 1 for us in terms of chronic diseases."

"We're just too darn fat, ladies and gentlemen, and we're going to do something about it," Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson said Tuesday at a news conference.

### **FACTORS CITED**

Americans' fast-food lifestyle, increased use of computers and a decline in school physical education programs all were cited by Thompson and other officials as factors contributing to the nation's fat problem. Two out of three adults and nine million children are overweight or obese, they said.

Searching for the clear winner misses the point, some experts say.

"I'm not concerned about what the leading contender is; I'm concerned about stopping them all," said Dr. Marilyn Glassberg, an assistant professor of medicine at the University of Miami.

To combat the obesity epidemic, the government Tuesday unveiled a new public service campaign to urge people to make minor amendments to improve their health, taking the stairs or switching to fat-free milk, for instance.

The researchers analyzed data from 2000 for the leading causes of death and for those preventable factors known to contribute to them. Like tobacco, obesity and inactivity increase the risks for the top three killers: heart disease, cancer and such cerebrovascular ailments as strokes. Obesity and a sedentary lifestyle also strongly increase the risk of diabetes, the sixth leading cause of death.

### **HEALTH BENEFITS**

Research shows that losing weight can lower blood pressure, improve cholesterol and decrease the risk of diabetes.

"We now know that interventions such as weight reduction and exercise can dramatically impact all of these factors that we know about," said Dr. Romeo Majano, a cardiologist at South Miami Hospital.

Yet some physicians are reluctant to address the issue with patients, said Ali Mokdad, chief of the CDC behavioral surveillance branch and one of the study's authors. In another study, he found less than half of doctors counsel obese patients to lose weight.

## **SEAT BELT CAMPAIGN**

But similar public health initiatives in the past, such as encouraging seat belt use, have had an impact on mortality rates, said Dr. J. Michael McGinnis, a co-author of the accompanying editorial.

Failing to address the problem may have dramatic ramifications, said Dr. Gregory Cohn, an internist specializing in cardiovascular prevention at the Cleveland Clinic Florida.

Rampant obesity will lead to greater reliance on hospitals to treat heart disease and renal conditions. "What's going to happen to us down the road? The healthcare system is already stretched to the limit," Cohn said. "Is our system going to be able to handle it? I would say not."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.