

# HEALTH

## OBESITY CAUSES PREMATURE DEATH IN AFRICAN-AMERICANS

DALLAS, Texas, — One out of every three young African-American women is considered obese, according to researchers of heart disease risk among young adults.

Because obesity is a contributing risk factor of heart disease, stroke and other life-threatening disorders, it is a key culprit in thousands of premature deaths among African-Americans each year. Young black women are more likely to be obese than are young white women or young men of either ethnic group.

"Obesity is a significant problem in African-Americans, particularly among women," says Lynne Wagenknecht, Dr. P.H., professor of public health sciences at Bowman Gray School of Medicine in Winston-Salem, N.C., "and it is related adversely to nearly every known cardiovascular risk factor." The definition of obesity here is about 20 percent over desirable weight.

"Our findings represent a clear and urgent warning to black Americans," Wagenknecht told the American Heart Association's recent Editor Conference on Cardiovascular Diseases in African-Americans held in Washington, D.C.

"What our study shows is that one out of every three young adult African-American women is considered obese, while only about 14 percent of white men and women in the same age group are overweight," Wagenknecht says. "These trends continue into middle age. By 45-65 years of age, 77 percent of African-American women and 60 percent of African-American men are considered obese, compared to about half the white population."

In this large-scale study of the relationship between obesity and various disease processes, researchers found obesity to be associated with a doubling of the prevalence of high blood pressure, a 1.5-fold increase in high blood cholesterol and four times the prevalence of diabetes. This is a part of the Coronary Artery Disease Risk Development in Young Adults Study (called CARDIA), funded by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute.

While obesity alone is a risk factor, it is frequently com-

pounded by the high blood cholesterol that tends to accompany it. Obesity contributes to an increase in total blood cholesterol packages in which cholesterol travels through the bloodstream, says Luther Clark, M.D., (title???) of the department of medicine at the State University of New York Health Sciences Center in Brooklyn.

"Reducing weight is one way to reduce one's cholesterol level as well," he says.

"Epidemic coronary heart disease (CHD) is very clearly a byproduct of high-fat, high-cholesterol, high-calorie diets along with sedentary lifestyles," says John Flack, M.D., professor of epidemiology at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

"In the past it was mistakenly assumed that African-Americans experienced less CHD than whites, but this notion has been proven false. Actually, CHD deaths in African-American women first exceeded those for white women in this country more than 40 years ago, and the CHD death rates for African-American men have exceeded those of white men since 1957."

Many of the underlying causes of the obesity problem among blacks appear to be cultural in nature, rather than genetic, authorities say.

"A question that often comes up is whether the amount of fat consumed by most African-Americans is greater than that consumed by white Americans," Clark points out. "Given the amount of pork, fried foods and organ foods in the African-American diet, it would appear that this is true. But since most whites get more of their fat from beef and other sources, it may be the type of fat, rather than just the quantity, that makes the difference."

The composition of the diet is an important consideration, Wagenknecht agrees. She cites a Philadelphia study that found that most black women do not share many white women's interest in health-conscious diets built around such foods as fruit and low-fat cottage cheese and yogurt. These black women were much more frequent consumers of high-fat, high calorie fast foods and sweets.

"A cultural leaning toward

foods that are rich in saturated fats and sweets and perhaps a less favorable attitude toward health-conscious foods may contribute to greater levels of obesity in African-Americans," she says.

Other cultural factors that could affect women in particular may include the facts that black women tend to have children at an earlier age, that they have more children on the average, and that fewer black mothers breast-feed their babies.

"There's a good bit of information that suggests the reproductive characteristics of African-American women in comparison to white women may partially explain their higher frequency of obesity," Wagenknecht says. "Pregnancy and raising children greatly impacts the lifestyles of a women."

Having children often reduces a woman's time for physical activity. If she has a child at a very young age, this may start a weight gain earlier in life than if she waited to have children. And having several children close together decreases her likelihood of weight loss after childbirth.

In 1985, 65 percent of white women breast-fed their infants while only 33 percent of black women breast-fed theirs. Wagenknecht says a particular type of fat laid down during pregnancy for breast-feeding may be difficult to lose if a woman doesn't breast-feed.

In addition, among blacks, there is less social stigma attached to obesity. "African-American girls aged 9 to 11 who were overweight felt much more socially accepted than did simi-



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lar-sized white girls," says Wagenknecht. "It seems that African-Americans may have a more tolerant attitude toward moderate overweight."

Another important determinant of obesity is lack of exercise, and indications are that black women in general get less vigorous exercise than whites.

"African-Americans, particularly women, report less time in less regular physical exercise programs, individual sports and team sports," Wagenknecht notes. "On the other hand, African-American men and women report more frequently home exercise and calisthenics than white men and women. These differences suggest that one explanation for reduced levels of physical activity may be lim-

ited access to certain exercise facilities, possibly due to economic barriers."

Many blacks find it difficult to view exercise as an aid to health

and weight control, much less as sport or fun, says Bylye Avery, founding president of the National Black Women's Health (See Obesity Page 17)

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