

Big Problem – lots of little solutions.

The incidence of overweight and obesity is on the rise. There is no magic fairy to “disappear it” and it won’t go away till the whole community takes action. Everybody has a role in sorting this problem.

We’ve got a big problem! We are getting too fat. More than half of adults and a third of New Zealand children are overweight and, it matters. It is not just that our pants are getting too tight or the latest fashions don’t look flash, it is wrecking our health. Being too fat makes us more likely to suffer from a host of very serious health problems. Many of these illnesses will kill us early, cost us quality of life and a whole lot of dosh at the doctor’s surgery.

So what is the problem? Too much food, too much fat, too much sugar and not enough action.

Modern lifestyles have left the normal evolutionary process way behind. Our bodies are still geared for the time when food had to be chased or gathered and getting food was hard physical work. Today we “forage” for “fast” food by car. What’s more our bodies still expect there might be a famine at any moment and store up fat to keep us going during the lean times. But the famines don’t happen anymore. Instead, we feast day after day after day. We no longer use much energy gathering our food, earning our living or managing our daily lives but we go on eating more and more food. Our modern lifestyle with all its labour saving devices, bums-on-seats leisure pursuits and fabulous, “fun” food is “toxic” to our old-fashioned bodies. These bodies are meant to be physically active and fed only moderate amounts of food.

Once the weight is on it is tough to get off. Even successful slimmers struggle to keep it off long term – all the temptations of our modern food supply and lifestyle make it really hard to change bad habits. Even the most committed families struggle against the barrage of advertising, the easy availability of high fat, high sugar foods, cars, labour saving devices, the popularity of leisure activities that keep us sitting down and the safety fears that stop from us venturing out to walk and play in our streets and parks.

There is no single magic solution and no single individual or group that can make it better. However as a community there are many things we can push for that would change things enough to make the difference.

Here are 20 things which will help to reduce obesity. None of these steps alone will combat obesity but added together they will make a difference.

1. Less advertising of high fat, high sugar foods. The ads fuel the “pester power” of the kids and influence their parents. The advertising of high fat, high sugar foods and drinks should be restricted to protect the vulnerable and gullible.
2. Smaller portion sizes in restaurants, cafes and takeaway food outlets. Large portions encourage people to eat more than they want or need. The responsibility for reducing portion size belongs to chefs, the hospitality industry, food manufacturers and retailers.

3. Stop “up-selling” takeaway and snack foods, ie a much bigger portion for very little extra cost and the “Would you like a chips, a drink etc with that”. People buy and eat more than they want or need because of the pressure and/or the value.
4. Helpful food labels. Presently some health claims, especially “% fat free” lead people to believe foods are low in energy when they may not be. Some reduced fat foods have extra sugar added to maintain palatability and contain as much energy as their higher fat counterparts.
5. Nutrition labelling on fast foods and more information in cafes and restaurants so high energy foods can be easily identified.
6. Mandatory food policies in schools to ensure healthy food is sold in tuck shops and canteens. This not only reduces consumption of poor foods but reinforces the messages taught in classroom health lessons.
7. The removal of soft drink and snack food vending machines from schools and their environs.
8. Appropriate sponsorships in schools. Sponsorship arrangements with companies selling high fat, high sugar foods and drinks are not appropriate. They identify and reinforce the idea that these foods are a part of a “normal” lifestyle in children’s minds. They are daily reminders of high fat, high sugar foods suitable only as occasional treats
9. Appropriate fund raising schemes in schools. Foods used for fund raising projects should be healthy.
10. A greater selection of affordable healthy foods and fewer high fat/high sugar foods to chose from in supermarkets, cafes, restaurants and fast food outlets.
11. Incentives and/or legislation to encourage manufacturers to reformulate food products to reduce the fat, sugar and energy content.
12. Safe, accessible, pleasant, well maintained places for children to play and adults to exercise. Affordable physical recreation opportunities – low cost use of swimming pools, tennis courts, sport grounds etc to encourage active leisure.
13. Cycle ways, footpaths, shopping and urban areas designed to encourage walking and cycling rather than driving.
14. Building design that encourages stair use and active living.
15. Transport systems that encourage walking and active commuting.
16. Physical education programmes in schools that encourage active play and daily, habitual, lifestyle activity.

17. Walking school buses or cycle trains to get children out of cars, more active and accustomed to “active” transport options.
18. Controlled pedestrian crossings, reduced speed limits and other road safety measures to increase the safety of roads near schools so children can walk to and from school.
19. Appropriate sponsorship of sports activities. Linking physical activity with high fat, high sugar foods and drinks is counter productive.
20. Adequate funding for health promotion activities in the community.

Making these sorts of changes requires commitment at a political, community, family and individual level. Talk about these issues in your communities, talk to your MP, your local school, local councillors, community leaders - anyone who can make a difference. Take action now.

10 Facts about obesity (separate text box or panel)

- One in 2 adult New Zealanders is overweight and of those nearly 1 in 5 is obese.
- One in 3 children is overweight.
- Nine percent of children are obese.
- Fat children more often than not become fat adults and some of the thin children will get fat once they reach adulthood.
- Sixty percent of Pacific children and 40 percent of Maori children are overweight and/or obese. Almost 30 percent of Pacific children are obese.
- Reliable estimates suggest around 11,000 preventable, premature deaths a year are caused by poor nutrition and lack of physical activity. By comparison there are between 400 and 500 deaths a year from road crashes and around 5000 from smoking.
- Between 1989 – 1997 there was a 55 % increase in obesity among adult New Zealanders.
- The mean weight of 14 year olds increased by more than 6kg (approximately one stone) between 1985 and 2002. There was little or no change in height in that time.
- Conservative estimates of the direct costs of obesity on the health system is \$247 million a year.
- Experts believe the incidence of obesity has yet to peak and will get worse before it gets better.

Celia Murphy
Executive Director
Obesity Action Coalition
PO Box 12115
Wellington
Ph: 04 473 8031
Mb: 021 232 7519
Fax: 04 473 8032