

Why we are Worried: The Facts

Obesity

Obesity is a significant issue in Canada and not only among adults: rates of overweight and obesity among children have also been rising, to the extent that this trend has been called an epidemic (Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], n.d., p. 1). It is important to note that “children who are obese over a period of time, or who become obese in later childhood or adolescence, are more likely to remain obese as adults” (Heart and Stroke Foundation of Alberta, NWT and Nunavut, n.d.).

Obesity is the result of many biological, behavioural, cultural, societal and environmental factors at play (PHAC & Canadian Institute for Health Information [CIHI], 2011, p. 17). While genetics do play a role (PHAC & CIHI, 2011, p. 17), lifestyle has a significant influence. “There is general agreement that the current epidemic of obesity is largely associated with an environment that, in multiple ways, promotes excessive food intake and discourages physical activity” (Raine, 2004, p. 23).

Understanding the impact of broad social, economic and environmental determinants of health on obesity is key to addressing this epidemic. Research has found that “poor diet and physical inactivity appear to be clustered in lower socioeconomic groups” (Raine, 2004, p. 33).

Lack of accessibility to affordable exercise facilities or inability to afford sports and exercise equipment is thought to hinder physical activity in those belonging to lower socioeconomic groups (Raine, 2004, p. 36). Design of communities — including whether there are safe places to play and exercise outside — can also influence whether children are active (Koplan et al., 2005, p. 205). Studies cited by Raine (2004, p. 35) have also shown that people in lower-income neighbourhoods may have direct access to fast-food options but have decreased access to supermarkets. They also may have difficulties accessing transportation to less expensive food markets, thereby making access to healthy foods a challenge.

Did you know...

- An emerging global issue, obesity affects more than one in four Canadian adults, according to measured height and weight data from 2007 to 2009 (PHAC & CIHI), 2011, p. 1).
- Obesity is one of the most significant factors contributing to many chronic conditions. An elevated body mass index increases the risk of type 2 diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease and certain forms of cancers (Conference Board of Canada, 2012; PHAC & CIHI, 2011, p. 2).

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Fiscal implications:

- Using costs associated with the eight chronic diseases most consistently linked to obesity, the PHAC and CIHI (2011, p. 2) conservatively estimate that obesity cost the Canadian economy an estimated \$4.6 billion in 2008, up \$735 million (19 per cent) from 2000. A comparable study that used costs associated with 18 chronic diseases estimated the cost to be close to \$7.1 billion (PHAC & CIHI, 2011, p. 2).

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