

South Africans are overweight - survey

South Africans weigh in as the third fattest nation on earth. A survey done in 2010 by Glaxo SmithKline has found that 61% of the South African population are overweight or morbidly obese. In addition to this survey, a study done by the Medical Research Council in 2007 found that 56% of adult women and 29% of adult men in South Africa were overweight or obese.

15-19 October 2011 highlights National Obesity Week which aims to increase awareness about the impact of obesity in the lives of South Africans.

According to Claudine Ryan, registered dietician (SA) for Compass Group Southern Africa, obesity is a chronic medical condition caused by too much body fat.

"Obesity is diagnosed by the Body Mass Index (BMI)," she says. "You are obese if your BMI is more than 29.9 kg / m². You can easily work out your own BMI by dividing your weight (in kilograms) by your height multiplied by itself (in metres). The higher your BMI is, the more body fat a person has," says Ryan.

Obesity is characterised by an increase in fat cells and an increase in secretions of disease causing products from large fat cells. It leads to a number of health consequences including:

- Wear and tear on joints which causes osteoarthritis
- Sleep apnea
- Insulin resistance
- Polycystic ovarian syndrome
- Diabetes
- Hypertension
- Cardiovascular disease
- Stroke
- Gallstones
- Gout
- Most types of cancer
- Shortened life expectancy

"Generally, obesity is caused by a combination of eating too much and exercising too little. It occurs over time when too many calories are consumed than what is burned. Genetics do play a role and some people gain weight easier than others. Fat cells also produce hormones which play an important role in how much you eat, how much energy your body spends and how much you weigh," says Ryan.

There is no quick fix to weight loss. Obesity needs to be managed over time with a combination of diet, physical activity and lifestyle changes. Make small changes and be realistic about the amount of weight you want to lose. A good goal to start with is losing 5 - 10 percent of your total body weight and aim for half to one kilogram per week. Losing too much weight in a very short time may mean you are losing muscles and not fat. You do not necessarily need a diet - start with the following small changes:

- Eat a small breakfast every morning to kick start your metabolism
- Do not skip meals as this will result in over eating at your next meal

- Keep meals small and rather include snacks in-between meals
- Healthy snacks to include:
 - 1 Whole fruit
 - 1 cup of fruit salad
 - 1/2 cup of low fat yoghurt
 - 3 - 6 Whole wheat crackers with spread or low fat cottage cheese
 - 4 cups of popcorn
 - Small glass of low fat milk
 - 1 Slice of Rye or low GI bread with spread
- Cut down on sugar and fats which are high in empty calories
- Replace sugary soft drinks with lower calorie beverages like water, low fat milk, sugar-free cold drinks and sugar-free flavoured waters
- Use little or no added fats when preparing food and use healthy cooking methods like grilling, steaming, boiling and baking in the oven. 1 teaspoon of oil contains almost the same amount of calories as 1 slice of bread
- Remove visible fat from meat before cooking e.g. skin of chicken and buy lean meat.
- Avoid adding rich sauces, gravies and salad dressings to meals
- Include sweet treats occasionally and keep to a small amount when you do have them
- Include more whole grains, fruit and vegetables. They are high in fiber and keep you satisfied for longer.
- Watch your portion sizes at main meals. Fill half of your plate with vegetables or salad, quarter protein and quarter starch
- Drink enough fluids throughout the day. It fills your stomach and prevents dehydration which may increase your appetite
- Be physical active for at least 30 minutes on most days. Easy activities include walking, dancing and cycling.

There are no quick or easy ways to lose weight. A change in behaviour and mindset is crucial. Perhaps we should learn to "eat to live" and not "live to eat".