

Irish Heart Foundation

Obesity Fact Sheet

Obesity is defined as a disease in which excess body fat has accumulated to an extent that health is adversely affected¹. Body Mass Index (BMI) and waist circumference are used to assess a person's weight.

Causes of obesity

- Obesity occurs when there is an imbalance between energy intake (food) and energy output (activity).
- The overwhelming influences of obesity in 99% of the population are environmental and include marketing, advertising, increasing portion sizes, accessibility and availability of foods and facilities, increased automation and increased car use among other factors^{2, 3}.

Link to heart disease

Obesity contributes to high blood pressure, abnormal blood fat levels (affecting LDL and HDL cholesterol and triglycerides), increased blood-clotting tendency and raised blood insulin levels and type 2 diabetes mellitus⁴.

Prevalence

- Obesity is the most common nutritional disorder in the world⁵.

Irish Adults (18 years and over)

- Two out of five Irish adults - 39% (45% of men; 33% of women) are overweight⁶.
- One in four - 25% (24% of men; 26% of women) is obese⁶.
- The trend towards obesity in Ireland is increasing. Between 1990 and 2000 the prevalence of obesity increased by 67% overall, up 1.25 fold in women (from 13%) and up 2.5 fold in men (from 8%)⁷.
- Ireland has the fourth highest prevalence of overweight and obesity in men in the EU and the seventh highest prevalence among women².

Irish Children (5-12 years)

- Overweight and obesity is now the most common childhood disorder in Europe⁵.

- One in ten 5-12 year olds is overweight and a further one in ten is obese. In total, 22% of 5-12 year olds are overweight or obese⁸.

Irish Teenagers (13-17 years)

- One in five teenagers is overweight or obese (11% overweight and 8% obese)⁹.
- There has been a significant increase in teenage obesity since 1990 with an 8-fold increase in males (1% to 8%) and a 2-fold increase in females (3% to 6%)⁹.

Economic Burden

- Costs for treating obesity in Ireland is estimated at €0.4 billion. The number of premature deaths annually attributable to obesity currently approximates to 2,000⁴.

Prevention and Treatment of Obesity

- Long-term weight loss is extremely difficult to achieve. Adults who remain in conventional weight loss programmes can realistically expect a maximum weight loss of only 10%¹⁰.
- The relative intellectual and psychological immaturity of children compared with adults, and their susceptibility to peer pressure present additional practical obstacles to the successful treatment of childhood obesity¹¹.
- One possible reason for the failure of conventional and non-surgical interventions may be that adverse environmental factors overwhelm behavioural and educational techniques designed to reduce energy intake and increase physical activity¹⁰.

The Way Forward

This is a major societal problem – the “toxic environment” needs to be targeted as it simultaneously restricts mobility and stimulates higher calorie intake. A population health approach, tackling both policy and legislation is required to create a supportive environment in which individuals are empowered to change if they choose.

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