

## HEALTH FOCUS ARTICLE

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# *What Are Your Risks of Obesity?*

**By Carol Orwig, FNP-C**  
**Health Focus Contributor**

As you sit at the table feeling guilty about the extra piece of pie you just ate, you may ponder the question: what are my risks of becoming overweight or obese?

A study recently answered that question. Analyzing data from 1971 to 2001 for 4,117 men and women in the Framingham Heart Study, researchers found that the risk was greater than 50 percent for becoming overweight and about 30 percent for becoming obese over a 30-year period.

Being concerned about obesity is not just a matter of being able to fit into last year's swim suit. A major risk factor for heart disease, diabetes, osteoarthritis, obstructive sleep apnea and other illnesses, obesity is now considered the number one health problem in the world, surpassing even AIDS and malnutrition.

Young adults who are severely obese can expect to have anywhere from 5 to 20 years chopped off their life expectancy. And obesity is growing at alarming rates among children and adolescents as well as older adults.

**CUT THE CALORIES:** If you're thinking twice about the second piece of pie, you may have a step up on some Americans. A recent book on Body Mass Index by USDA nutritionist Shanthy Bowman found that Americans with a BMI of 25 or greater ate an average of 100 calories more a day than normal-weight adults.

**LESS FATTY FOODS:** Adults who are overweight, according to Bowman, consume more total fat and more saturated fat. When they ate chicken, 60 percent were likely to eat fried rather than baked, broiled or stewed chicken. And 60 percent preferred not to remove the fatty skin.

**MORE BREAKFAST, LESS DINNER:** As many other studies have found, overweight persons were more likely to skip breakfast, or skimp on it, and eat a high percentage of their daily calories later in the day.

**MORE EXERCISE, LESS TV:** And finally adults who watched more than two hours of television a day were more than twice as likely to be overweight as their more active counterparts.

**LESS MEAT, MORE VEGETABLES:** Another study found that meat eaters tended to gain weight faster than those who focused on fruits and vegetables. Not only vegetarians and vegans but semi-vegetarians had a lower risk of being overweight or obese than other adults.

**HAVE GOOD GENES:** If you've got one or more overweight parents, you have a risk of becoming overweight yourself. No one knows exactly how genetics and environment contribute to this tendency, but you can alter your lifestyle to compensate.

**DON'T DIET, DON'T BINGE:** One study of children at high risk of obesity found that those who reported dieting or binge eating were more likely than others to have increases in body fat and BMI. Overly restrictive diets are seldom successful

and, even when they are, they usually lead to a period of over-eating that more than makes up for any weight lost. Another theory is that teens who diet may already be showing a genetic tendency to being overweight.

**LIFESTYLE VERSUS DESTINY:** There's little question that lifestyle has had a major impact on the epidemic of obesity among young people. Fast food, soft drinks packed with high-fructose corn syrup, television, video games and computers are all part of a cycle of more empty calories and less physical activity.

Some experts believe, however, that these lifestyle factors may be less important for children than for adults. Taking another approach, two recent studies linked obesity in children to over-eating by mothers during pregnancy.

Guidelines established by the Institute of Medicine in 1990 recommend that women gain 11.5 to 16 kilograms (25 to 34 pounds), including the weight of the fetus, during pregnancy. One study found that mothers who exceeded this weight gain were more likely to have children who were already obese by age 3. In the other study, mothers who gained even the recommended weight had children prone to obesity. Mothers who don't gain enough weight are, of course, vulnerable to even more serious consequences, including premature births.

Researchers are also studying other factors such as the mother's weight before pregnancy, insulin levels during the third trimester, overly rapid weight gain during the first four months of life and the volume and composition of infant formula.

When it comes to reversing the trend toward obesity, some issues—such as the piece of pie on your plate—are painfully simple, while others are incredibly complex.

Carol Orwig, FNP-C, is a Family Nurse Practitioner at Peshtigo Family Practice in Peshtigo. For more information, or to schedule an appointment, please call 715-582-9949.