



Improving the Health of Canadians: Promoting Healthy Weights

With rates of overweight and obesity on the rise in Canada and abroad, healthy weights is currently a 'hot topic' among researchers and policy-makers. Obesity rates among Canadian adults have increased since the late 1970's.¹ Combined overweight/obesity rates have also increased among youth aged 12-17 over this same period.² Individuals who are overweight can be at an increased risk of becoming obese³ and those who are obese are at an increased risk for many preventable chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes.⁴

Battling obesity is more than telling Canadians “eat right and exercise”.

Created in 1999 as a part of the Canadian Institute for Health Information, the Canadian Population Health Initiative (CPHI) seeks to: foster a better understanding of factors that affect the health of individuals and communities; and contribute to the development of policies that reduce inequities and improve the health and well-being of Canadians. On February 15, 2006, CPHI released *Improving the Health of Canadians: Promoting Healthy Weights*. The report adopts a unique approach in addressing the issue of overweight and obesity in Canada. Achieving a healthy body weight has long been regarded simply as a result of one's personal choices involving diet and physical activity. However, promoting healthy weights is not quite so clear-cut. The report looks at how features of the environments where we live, learn, work and play can make it easier – or harder – for Canadians to make choices that promote healthy weights.

Where We Live: Home and Family Environment

Research indicates that there are numerous features of the home and family environment that may be linked to healthy weights. Many of these features pertain specifically to children and youth, and include the eating behaviours and physical activity patterns that parents and caregivers can help shape early in a child's life. Evidence indicates that exclusive breastfeeding,⁴⁻⁵ packing lunches instead of purchasing them at school and frequently sharing meals together at home as a family⁶ is linked to reduced overweight/obesity among children and youth as they get older. Evidence also shows that the amount of time spent watching television, using the computer or playing video games can be related to increased risk of overweight/obesity among children.¹

Information Gaps

- We do not know how (or if) different family structures are linked to obesity
- We do not know if there is an association between the number of televisions/computers per household and rates of overweight/obesity among children, youth and adults.

CLOSE-UPS

Within one week of its release, *Improving the Health of Canadians: Promoting Healthy Weights* received mention in 53 print articles nationwide. Data from the report was also featured in 37 broadcast items (radio and television) and 14 electronic mentions within days of the release.

“Combating obesity will take more than just cutting your calories and training for a local 10-kilometre run, according to a new study issued by the Canadian Institute for Health Information.

For the first time, researchers studied how environmental and societal factors impact a person's ability to maintain a healthy body weight.”

Times & Transcript, February 16, 2006

“It's a message that Canadians have heard repeatedly: the key to cinching in the waistline is to eat healthy and keep active. But a new report suggests that recipe is too simplistic for the complex and ballooning problem of obesity. The report by the Canadian Institute for Health Information shows that where we live, learn, work and play can help make or break our battle against the bulge.”

The Peterborough Examiner, February 16, 2006

Where We Learn: School

Studies indicate that the school setting is another environment where there are opportunities to educate children and youth about healthy weights. As noted in the report, healthy weight promotion in the school setting typically focuses on aspects such as healthy eating and physical activity, both on an individual level and within the context of a coordinated approach. The report speaks to the effectiveness of coordinated school programs that include the availability of nutritious food, physical education and the involvement of the broader school community.⁷

INFORMATION GAPS

- We do not know the impact that various provincial policies regarding physical activity and nutritious food in schools have on rates of obesity among children and youth.
- We do not know if removing vending machines from schools or changing their content has a long-term impact on rates of obesity among students.

Where We Work: Workplaces

Since many adults spend as much time at work as children do at school, the workplace can offer an environment to promote healthy weights. Relatively few companies in Canada have formal policies encouraging physical activity and other healthy behaviours.⁸ Evidence shows that workplace interventions which combine diet and physical activity initiatives can be successful in helping employees control overweight and obesity.⁷ Lack of space, lack of on-site facilities, insufficient company funds and lack of time due to short lunch breaks are among the factors that prevent workplaces from initiating or expanding physical activity programs.⁸

INFORMATION GAPS

- We do not know the costs and benefits associated with programs to promote healthy eating and physical activity in Canadian workplaces.
- We do not know the types of workplaces where programs may be most effective at promoting healthy weights.

Where We Play: Community and Physical Environment

The community and physical environment can also have an impact on an individual's body weight. New analyses presented in this report show that those living in Canada's urban cores are less likely to report being overweight or obese than those living in outlying areas or rural communities. Further, Canadians living in neighbourhoods where more residents bike or take public transit to work are less likely to report being overweight or obese than those living in neighbourhoods where fewer people bike or take public transit to get to work.

INFORMATION GAPS

- We do not completely understand the cause-effect nature of the relationship between urban sprawl and obesity.

Although a public opinion survey found that 58% of Canadian adults believe obesity is caused by personal choices, *Improving the Health of Canadians: Promoting Healthy Weights* shows that the environments where we live, learn, work and play can all have a role in shaping the choices that we make.

Within the coming year, qualitative consultations will be held with policy-makers and representatives from non-government organizations to evaluate the report's impact on policy and programmatic decisions to promote healthy weights.

REFERENCES

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For additional information on *Improving the Health of Canadians: Promoting Healthy Weights* and other CPHI products, please visit the CPHI Web site, at www.cihi.ca/cphi.