

## Preface

Obesity has emerged as the most prevalent serious public health problem of our time. It is a condition of excessive fat accumulation in adipose tissue, to the extent that health may be impaired. Certain detrimental effects to health are attributed to obesity. Obesity may develop at any age in either sex. Several factors may contribute to the development of obesity. Obesity develops over time and, once it develops, is difficult to treat. Obesity should not be regarded simply as a cosmetic problem affecting certain individuals, but a crisis that threatens global well-being.

The prevalence of obesity is increasing globally, with nearly half a billion of the World's population now considered to be overweight or obese. The obesity epidemic is related both to dietary factors and to an increasingly sedentary lifestyle. Obesity has significant co-morbidities and these are associated with substantial health care and social costs. It is a complex disorder of appetite regulation and energy metabolism controlled by specific biological factors. It arises when the intake of food is in excess of physiological requirements.

Obesity can be defined as *“a disease in which excess body fat has accumulated such that health may be adversely affected”*. Obesity is a worldwide health problem and it does not only affect developed countries, as there is now a significant increase in overweight and obesity throughout the developing world. The prevalence of obesity has recently increased in Asian as well as South American countries. Obesity is relatively common in Europe and North America. Current prevalence data from individual national studies collated by the International Obesity Task Force (IOTF) suggest that obesity ranges from 10 to 20% for men, and 10 to 25% for women. It has been suggested that obesity is now so common within the world's population that it is beginning to replace undernutrition and infectious diseases as the most significant contributor to ill health. It is estimated that, at the beginning of this century, more people will die from complications of overnutrition than of starvation.

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the prevalence of obesity in the India as well as in other regions of the world. During the last few decades, the greatest increase in obesity has been observed in populations that have been undergoing rapid modernisation. Thus, obesity is both a pandemic as well as an epidemic. The pandemic is so great that, it has even spawned a new word, **“globesity”**. The World Health Organization (WHO) recognized obesity as a major public health epidemic worldwide, in developed as well as in some developing countries. Moreover, the increasing prevalence of childhood obesity throughout the past two decades has been emphasized in many Western countries. Similar trends are now being observed among children in developing nations.

Obesity is caused by a combination of both genetic and environmental influences. The excess of fat in men tends to accumulate in the upper abdomen. In women, the favoured sites for the accumulation of fat are the buttocks, hips and thighs. The site of fat accumulation is considered a predominant factor for metabolic disorders of obesity. Coincident with the high rates of obesity, the prevalence of other chronic diseases like type 2 diabetes mellitus, hypertension and coronary heart disease is also escalating, and this increase is expected to continue. Obesity is a complex multifactorial chronic disease that develops from an interaction of genotype and the environment. The accompanying maladies of obesity are: Hypertension, Type II Diabetes, Cancer, Degenerative arthritis, Elevated cholesterol, Gallstones, Heart attacks and strokes, and Sleep disorders.

Our understanding of how and why obesity develops is incomplete, but involves the integration of social, behavioural, cultural, physiological, metabolic and genetic factors. Several factors have been implicated as the causes of obesity. They include: age, gender, activity level, dietary preferences, medications, genes, smoking, pregnancy, psychological factors.

In the next two decades, the control and management of obesity is the biggest challenge facing

Mankind. Serious coordinated efforts are required from anthropologists, bio-medical scientists, bureaucrats, doctors, health professionals and all others interested in the study of obesity, to launch a successful campaign to counter this scourge. Moreover, global as well as local policies must be formulated and implemented to address the problem of obesity.

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