

# Obesity set to be top cause of death

## Poor eating habits may surpass smoking

By **ROB STEIN**  
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Americans' sedentary lifestyle and poor eating habits are poised to overtake cigarette smoking as the nation's leading cause of preventable deaths, federal health officials reported yesterday.

Although tobacco is still the top cause of avoidable deaths, the combination of physical inactivity and unhealthful diets is gaining rapidly because of the resulting epidemic of obesity, officials said.

"Obesity is catching up to tobacco as the leading cause of death in America. If this trend continues, it will soon overtake tobacco," said Julie Gerberding, director of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which conducted the study.

Based on current trends, obesity will become No. 1 by next year, with the toll surpassing 500,000 deaths a year, rivaling the annual deaths from cancer, the researchers found.

"This is a tragedy," Gerberding said. "We are looking at this as a wake-up call."

In response, the Bush administration announced a new public education campaign, including a humorous advertising campaign that encourages Americans to take small steps to lose weight. In addition, the National Institutes of Health proposed an anti-obesity research agenda. Tomorrow, a special task force will present the Food and Drug Administration with formal recommendations on what that influential agency can do to help reverse the cresting public health crisis.

"Americans need to understand that overweight and obesity are literally killing us," Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson said. "To know that poor eating habits and inactivity are on the verge of surpassing tobacco use as the leading cause of preventable death in America should motivate all Americans to take action to protect their health. We need to tackle America's weight issues as aggressively as we are addressing smoking and tobacco."

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Critics, however, immediately denounced the moves as inadequate, saying the administration should take tougher steps to encourage more healthful eating and force the food industry to improve their products and stop advertising junk food to children.

"If the government said, 'You really ought to cut back on soft drinks and juice drinks,' those lobbyists would go berserk. They don't want to take on the food industry," said Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition and public health at New York University. "The focus is all on physical activity. It's perfectly safe. It's totally uncontroversial. But it's not enough to keep weight under control."

The new estimates of the rising toll of obesity come in the first update of a landmark paper that ranked the nation's preventable causes of death in 1990.

Cigarette smoking, which increases the risk for a host of illnesses including lung cancer, emphysema and heart disease, topped that list. But anti-smoking campaigns have led to a steady decline in the number of Americans who use tobacco, slowing the rise in the resulting toll of illness and death.

In the new analysis, which is being published in today's *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Gerberding and her colleagues conducted a comprehensive analysis of the medical literature and analyzed preventable deaths for the year 2000.

Tobacco still topped the list, accounting for 435,000 deaths, or 18.1 percent of the total. But poor diet and physical inactivity were close behind and rapidly gaining, causing 400,000 deaths or 16.6 percent. That represented a dramatic change from just 10 years earlier, when tobacco killed 400,000 Americans (19 percent) and poor diet and physical inactivity killed 300,000 (14 percent).

"There's been a big narrowing of the gap," said Ali Mokdad, who heads the CDC's behavioral research branch. It's

particularly striking because the toll of every other leading cause of preventable death — including alcohol, infections and accidents — steadily decreased during the same period, Mokdad said.

For example, in 1990, the third leading cause of preventable death, alcohol, was responsible for 100,000 deaths. By 2000, that number had dropped to 85,000.

But despite intense public concern, the number of Americans who are overweight or obese has continued to rise, reaching epidemic proportions. In 1990, about 15 percent of adult Americans were obese. By 2000, that number had climbed to 30 percent, with 65 per-

cent being overweight.

"Physical inactivity and poor diet is still on the rise. So the mortality will still go up. That's the alarming part — the behavior is still going in the wrong direction," Mokdad said.

Being overweight and obese makes people much more likely to be stricken by a variety of health problems, including diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

The new findings come a day after another study concluded that if current trends continue, one out every five dollars spent on health care in the United States will go toward obesity-related treatment by the year 2020.

The trend was not surprising, given the skyrocketing obesity rates, said

Richard Atkinson, president of the American Obesity Association. But the problem calls for a more intensive, innovative response, he added.

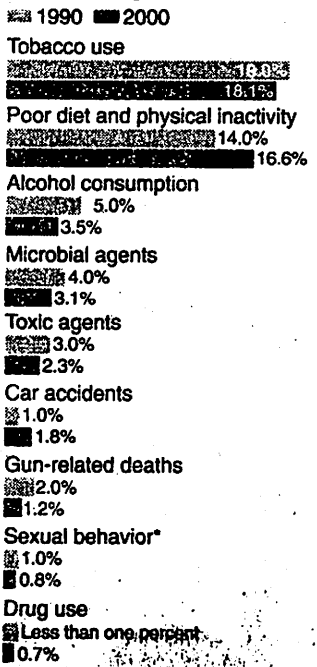
"There has been an explosion in obesity," Atkinson said. "If we just count on the American population to change their eating habits and exercise habits, we're going to continue to have obesity. What we're doing is not working."

The government should consider more innovative strategies than simply encouraging people to eat better and exercise, such as subsidizing the cost of foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables to make it more affordable to eat well.

## A GROWING PROBLEM

The number of deaths in the United States due to poor diet and physical inactivity rose between 1990 and 2000.

Actual causes of death, by percentage of total deaths



\* Includes deaths due to AIDS