

Obesity and Older Americans

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Obesity is in the news just about every day, with concerns for those from age 5 to age 105. But are the health risks the same for older and younger persons who carry excess weight? Is it wise or even safe for the elderly to try to lose extra body weight to improve their health and quality of life?

On a recent Family Album Radio broadcast, "Weight Control for Older Adults," produced by the UF/IFAS Extension and WUFT-FM, Dr. Linda Bobroff confirmed that first, obesity **is** on the rise among all people, including persons over 65 years old. And, second, that research shows obesity can speed up the decline in some older persons' physical abilities that may lead to a decline in their quality of life including the ability to live independently. Although obese older adults may live as long as those at a healthier body weight, they are at higher risk for diabetes and other chronic diseases, and spend considerably more money on health care.

Dr. Bobroff also pointed out that health professionals are often reluctant to recommend weight loss for overweight or obese older adults due to concerns that the weight loss may lead to muscle deterioration or possibly to loss of bone mass. However, several studies have found that weight loss programs can help older persons lose weight while improving physical function, quality of life, and medical conditions like diabetes that are often associated with obesity.

To promote the preservation of muscle and prevent the loss of bone mass, it is very important that weight loss programs for older persons include the adequate intake of all the nutrients needed for good health, especially protein, calcium, and vitamin D combined with weight-bearing exercise.

Older persons must select a diet rich in nutrients and low in fat and calories. This becomes especially important in the later years of life when calorie needs are low for many older persons. Elders who stay physically active are able to eat a higher calorie diet without gaining weight, and have more flexibility in food choices.

Strength training or weight bearing exercise can help older adults maintain or even increase their muscle mass, and may even offset the natural decline in lean body mass and calorie requirements that occur with age.

"Stronger people have better health outcomes," states Dr. David Buchner, Chief of the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) Physical Activity and Health Branch and well known gerontologist. However, some elderly people avoid physical activity and become sedentary out of fear of falling and fracturing a bone. Dr. Buchner added that emerging data indicate that physical activity can prevent falls by improving strength, balance, and endurance.

For 44 years our nation has paused during May to honor older Americans. The theme for Older Americans Month 2007 is "Older Americans: Making Choices for a Healthier Future." Continuing to be physically active is one of the most important choices older adults can make for a healthier future.

Physical activity is necessary to maintain physical and mental health and quality of life. The CDC promotes regular physical activity to improve health and reduce the risk of early death in the following ways:

- Reduces the risk of developing coronary heart disease (CHD) and the risk of dying from CHD
- Reduces the risk of stroke
- Reduces the risk of having a second heart attack in people who have already had one heart attack
- Lowers both total blood cholesterol and triglycerides and increases HDL or "good" cholesterol
- Lowers the risk of developing high blood pressure
- Helps reduce blood pressure in people who already have hypertension
- Lowers the risk of developing type 2 diabetes
- Reduces the risk of developing colon cancer
- Helps achieve and maintain a healthy body weight
- Reduces feelings of depression and anxiety

- Promotes psychological well-being and reduces feelings of stress
- Helps build and maintain healthy bones, muscles, and joints
- Helps older adults become stronger and better able to move about without falling or becoming excessively fatigued

Even though scientists have proven that being active can help reduce the risk of an early death, improve quality of life and promote a more independent lifestyle, more than 60% of older adults are inactive. Dr. Ken Cooper reminds us “it’s easier to maintain your health than regain it.” Let’s all celebrate Older Americans Month and make wise choices for a healthier future!