

OBESITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS ON QUALITY OF LIFE. A MAJOR CHALLENGE OF THE XXI CENTURY

VIOLETA FRÂNCU¹

¹“Lucian Blaga” University of Sibiu

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Abstract: Worldwide, there are over one billion overweight adults, more than 800 million people suffering from malnutrition. The food too rich in sugar, harmful fat and reduced physical activity are the main causes of obesity, which in turn is the main cause of chronic diseases such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, stroke and some cancers. Besides the consequences and health risks of obesity, another relevant issue is the quality of life of patients with obesity, by their stigma and discrimination. Evidence about discrimination against obese people can be found in situations such as being unable to be employed in certain positions, handicapping their education, marginalization etc. They suffer due to the attitude of health professionals and of other people towards them. All these can have a profound impact on quality of life of these individuals.

Obesity is a complex, multifactorial disease, a serious medical condition as a result of persistent weight gain at the expense of body fat (energy intake exceeds consumption). In recent decades, it has become one of the most common nutritional diseases in the world with the size of a pandemic, according to the WHO report 2011.

Obesity is one of the most serious public health problems of the 21st century. In the last 2-3 decades, the prevalence of obesity has tripled in many European countries and continues to grow, affecting the younger populations. According to WHO data, worldwide, more than 1.6 billion adults are overweight and 400 million are obese.

It is estimated that over the next 15 years, there will be 2.3 billion overweight adults and more than 700 million obese people. In Europe, 20-25%, that is over 150 million adults are obese (figure no. 1). In Romania, the prevalence of overweight and obesity ranges between 30-45% of the adult population.

Figure no. 1. Map of obesity in the world



Islands in the Pacific Ocean (located East of Australia) and Kuwait are the top group areas where there is the highest percentage of obesity among the population. In Europe, the countries most affected by this problem are the United Kingdom, Spain and Germany.

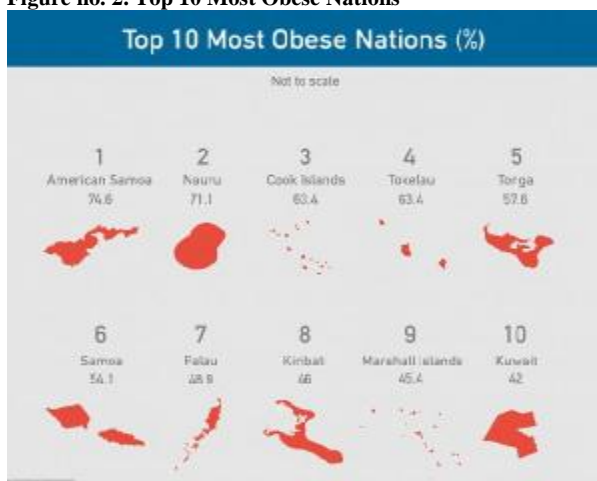
Lack of exercise kills twice as many people obese and obesity shortens life by eight years, undermining health.(1)

Americans are often categorized as a nation of obese, but things are not quite so. Increasing rates of obesity in populations from the islands located in the South Pacific Ocean took the USA out of the list of countries with the highest rates of obesity in the world.(2)

Experts state that introducing specific nutrition from the West led to the spread of obesity in these areas. American Samoa or East Samoa islands are on the first place in the obesity world rankings, with three quarters of the population obese.

Nauru and the Cook Islands are ranked second and third, with an obesity rate of 71% and 63% (figure no. 2). These islands were colonized by Australians, Americans, New Zealanders, British and French after the Second World War and the resulting social changes have led to increased cases of obesity.

¹Corresponding author: Violeta Frâncu, Str. Aleea Filozofilor, Nr. 3-5, Sibiu, România, E-mail: francuv@yahoo.com, Phone: +40269 210979
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Figure no. 2. Top 10 Most Obese Nations

With a share of 33%, the USA and Saudi Arabia lead the second group of states with the most obese. Almost the same percentages are found in Mexico (32.1%), South Africa (31.3%), Argentina (29.7%), Australia (26.8%), Spain (26.6%), Russia (26.5 %) and Germany (25.1%). In Europe, the best situated are France, Italy, Sweden, Denmark, Netherlands and Romania, where the rate of obesity is around 10% (figure no. 3).

Figure no. 3. Most Obese Nations in Europe**Obesity in Romania**

In Romania, about 30% of the population suffer from obesity.

- 20% is overweight;
- the number of overweight children is by 18% higher in the last decade;
- the most affected of obesity are people aged 15-64 years.

Source: Centre of Health Statistics of the Ministry of Public Health

- 40% of children are overweight;
- 60% of adults are overweight and 30% are obese; the percentage of obese men is 27% and women 29%.

Source: Society for Endocrinology

- 7.7% of the total male population is obese - 9.5% of the total female population is obese.

Study Eurostat (European Statistical Office)

Obesity is a risk factor in about 75% of contemporary diseases; a Romanian in three is overweight -

one in four is obese; in Romania over 3.5 million are obese; only 10% of them go to a medical examination; only one percent of them are included in a national education programme against obesity.

Social factors and obesity

Even if it is generally accepted that obesity occurs when energy gained from the food is higher than the consumed energy, the influence of these two factors based on social factors is a topic of hot discussions.

The correlation between social class and Body Mass Index (BMI) varies at global level. A study conducted in 1989 showed that in the developed countries, women from a higher social class were less likely to become obese. There were no significant differences in men from different social classes. In developing countries, it was found a higher rate of obesity in women, men and children from higher social classes.

The same study was resumed in 2007, when it indicated similar but weaker relationships. It is believed that this is due to the effects of globalization. In the developed countries, obesity in adults and overweight adolescents is correlated with income inequality.

A similar relationship was found in the United States where more and more adults, even in higher social classes are obese, in countries where economic inequality is obvious.

Many explanations have been offered regarding the link between BMI and social class. It is believed that in the developed countries, wealthy people can afford more food rich in nutrients, are subject to greater social pressure to remain weak and have more opportunities to maintain their physical condition. In the undeveloped countries, food availability, high energy consumption due to physical labour and cultural values favouring overweight people contribute to the present situation.(3)

The attitude that people have towards weight can also play a role with regard to obesity. It was found that there is a correlation between friends, siblings and spouses regarding the change in time of the Body Mass Index. Stress and lower social status seem to increase the risk of obesity.

Obesity and its implications on quality of life

Obesity is no longer just an aesthetic problem. It is considered a disease and one of the biggest threats to humanity in the XXI century by its serious consequences on health and lowered life expectancy and an important impact on quality of life.(4)

Obesity occurs when food intake (calories) exceeds constantly the energy consumption of the organism. Modern life style provides ideal conditions for this to happen. First, eating habits have changed, being based on processed foods, high in calories but low in vitamins and valuable nutrients, precooked food, sweets and sweetened beverages that represent true "bomb" calories.

Social factors (pressure from the media and TV commercials), emotional factors (stress of modern life is compensated by many people through over-eating) and family factors (obese families) contributes to increased consumption. On the other hand, in the last hundred years, physical activity of the "modern man" has dramatically decreased.

The consequences of obesity are worst. Obesity is the main cause that leads to diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, the main causes of death today. In addition, obesity leads to joint problems, respiratory, digestive problems and increases the risk of some forms of cancer.

Last but not least, obesity has negative psycho-emotional consequences, from early childhood, obese children being often marginalized and even ridiculed, leading to social isolation and problems of professional integration.

CONCLUSIONS

Obesity has profound implications on the lives of people affected, both in terms of social aspects and in terms of health.

Obesity causes an intense psychosocial pressure, which can lead to isolation, depression, problems at work/difficulty of finding a job and social stigma.

And all of the medical conditions and complications can ultimately lead to early death of affected persons. Obesity associated diseases cause a decrease in life expectancy of about 9 years in obese women and about 12 years in obese men.

Treatment of obesity (and especially its consequences) can be very complicated and expensive. There are many drugs whose efficacy is limited and which have often unwanted side effects, that can lead to discontinuation of treatment. A modern solution, designed especially for extreme (morbid) obesity is represented by the so-called "obesity surgery" (bariatric surgery), based on the removal of certain portions of the digestive tract (stomach and intestine parts).(5)

The right solution to get rid of obesity (unfortunately most difficult to put into practice) is but the change in lifestyle, by promoting physical activity (at least 30 minutes of physical exercise moderately at least 5 days per week) and reducing food intake by limiting high-calorie foods (fats, sweets, flour) and increasing the intake of colored vegetables (red or green) and fruits.

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