

Aging Lifestyles: Obesity thins the ranks of women in some regions

by Joe_Volz

A few years ago, we employed a baby sitter who was obese, smoked and loved all the wrong foods.

She routinely brought buns and cookies to our house to share with our children. She rarely exercised other than walking to and from her car. We read in the newspaper recently that she had died - in her 50s.

Henrietta could have been a poster child for the latest report from the National Center for Health Statistics, which reports that women's life spans have fallen markedly since the early 1980s. That is, among women who live in Appalachia, the Deep South or Texas.

Why, after so many decades of increasing life expectancy - it had increased by 17 years to the age of 78 between 1933 and 2005 - do nearly one in five American women now face falling life expectancy?

After all, we boast that we have made major advances in medicine.

But our affluence might be killing us.

Obesity is, literally, a big reason. About 33 percent of women are obese now compared with 31 percent of men. And extreme obesity is twice as common in women as men. What people eat is literally killing them.

The researchers reported we might be on the edge of an obesity epidemic that will increasingly lead to lower life spans for many, not just those who are poor or minorities.

Obesity does not discriminate: It strikes women of all ages and in all walks of life. The decline in life span noted now in just a few counties will spread nationwide - if we don't take action.

It is a phenomenon that is "unheard of in any other developed country," said Majid Ezzati, lead author and a Harvard University professor of international health. It's particularly disturbing since our country is the wealthiest and spends the most on health care of any in the world.

The study found that after 1983, higher life span were associated with wealth and perhaps with race as well. Life expectancy declined among blacks, women and those living in poverty where knowledge about healthful lifestyles is lacking. Regions such as Appalachia and the Deep South, have large pockets of poor and poorly educated people.

A primary reason for the rising life expectancy from 1961 to 1983 was because the death rate from heart attacks began to fall in the 1960s, especially among men. Women then had fewer heart attacks and less cardiovascular illness. In addition, doctors paid less attention to women's health needs than to men.

By 1983, however, as women moved into the work world outside the home they began to experience the same stresses as men had traditionally suffered including smoking. And female death rates from heart attack and other illnesses related to obesity and other factors increased.

The report emphasized that declining death rates correlate with higher rates of smoking, obesity and high blood pressure among women, all of which contribute to cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer. HIV and AIDS also contribute to their lower age at death.

Obesity, however although prevalent in impoverished areas, does not discriminate: It strikes women of all ages and in all walks of life. The decline in life span noted now in just a few counties will spread nationwide - if we don't take action.

There are a lot of women, and men, rich or poor, can do to make sure they do not die before their time.

You do need to pay attention to some fundamental healthy living guidelines-particularly as you grow older.

Here are some:

- Eat healthful diets; control your weight.

- Exercise several times a week.

- Get regular medical checkups and if your blood pressure or cholesterol head out of control, follow doctors' orders.

- And of course, smoking is a no-no.

Why are the poor most affected? That is a debate that rages on among the experts with no definitive answers in sight.

Ezzati told The New York Times, "How much of this is the ability to have a particular lifestyle? And how much if it is of it is the impact of income on risk behavior like alcohol and tobacco (use)?"

Whatever the reason, Ezzati argues that the bottom 20 percent of the population is "not getting any better" and unless the government responds in a much bigger way, the health of the entire nation could be seriously affected.

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