



Obesity, Nutrition, Physical Activity and Cancer

Making healthy lifestyles a national priority

The Cancer Link

Obesity, physical inactivity, and poor nutrition are major risk factors for cancer, second only to tobacco use. One third of the estimated 585,720 cancer deaths in the US this year can be attributed to poor diet, physical inactivity, and overweight and obesity. Currently, approximately two in three adults and one in three youth are overweight or obese.

Overweight and obesity are associated with increased risk for several common cancers, including colon, esophageal, kidney, pancreatic, endometrial, and postmenopausal breast cancer. The biological link between overweight/obesity and cancer is believed to be related to multiple effects on fat and sugar metabolism, immune function, hormone levels and proteins that affect hormone levels, and other factors related to cell growth. Maintaining a healthy body weight throughout life is key to reducing cancer risk.



Nutrition

Poor nutrition and the consumption of high-calorie foods and beverages are major contributors to overweight and obesity and increase the risk of cancer. The American Cancer Society (ACS) recommends consuming a healthy diet, with an emphasis on plant foods, in order to reduce cancer risk. Recommendations include choosing foods and beverages in amounts that achieve and maintain a healthy weight, limiting consumption of processed and red meats, consuming fruits and vegetables and whole grains instead of refined grain products, and limiting alcohol intake. A study found that nonsmoking adults who followed the ACS guidelines for weight control, diet, physical activity, and alcohol were lived longer and had a lower risk of dying from cancer and cardiovascular diseases.

Physical Activity

Regular physical activity helps maintain a healthy body weight by balancing caloric intake with energy expenditure. Physical activity may also reduce the risk of breast, colon, endometrium, and advanced prostate cancer, independent of body weight. ACS recommends that adults engage in at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity each week and that children and adolescents engage in at least 1 hour of moderate- or vigorous-intensity activity each day. Physical activity may also be beneficial after a cancer diagnosis, reducing the risk of recurrence or death and improving quality of life.

Combating the Problem

Despite the evidence linking overweight and obesity, poor nutrition, and physical inactivity to increased cancer risk, the majority of Americans are not meeting recommended nutrition and physical activity targets. Social, economic, environmental, and cultural factors strongly influence individual choices about diet and physical activity. Reversing obesity trends and reducing the associated cancer risk will require a broad range of strategies that include policy and environmental changes that make it easier for individuals to regularly make healthy diet and physical activity choices.

The American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network's (ACS CAN) advocacy work on obesity, nutrition, and physical activity is focused on creating healthy social and physical environments and providing consumers with clear, useful information that support making healthy lifestyle choices.

At the Federal Level

ACS CAN's federal advocacy work is largely focused on protecting and implementing existing laws.

Affordable Care Act

This law contains several key provisions focused on prevention and wellness. ACS CAN strongly supports the implementation of and opposes any efforts to dismantle these key provisions:

- **Calorie labeling of standard menu items in chain restaurants** and similar venues and of food and beverage items in certain vending machines.
- **Coverage of preventive health services, including obesity screening and counseling and behavioral interventions for weight loss, with no cost sharing** through private insurance plans in the new health insurance exchanges and Medicare, and an incentive for states to cover them in Medicaid.
- **The Prevention and Public Health Fund**, providing \$1 billion per year through FY 2017 and increased amounts thereafter for prevention, wellness, and public health activities. A significant portion of this money has been spent on community-based initiatives focused on making community, school, and worksite environments healthier.
- **A National Prevention Strategy and Action Plan**, created by the National Prevention, Health Promotion, and Public Health Council, composed of senior officials from numerous government agencies, with input from an advisory committee of non-government experts – including ACS CAN. The Strategy provides a comprehensive plan for increasing the number of Americans who are healthy at all stages in life, and the Action Plan includes detailed federal government actions for implementing it. Both the Strategy and Action Plan include healthy eating and active living as priority areas.



The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010

This law includes a number of provisions focused on improving school nutrition and wellness that ACS CAN strongly supports:

- **Updated evidence-based national nutrition standards for school meals**, coupled with increased federal reimbursement;
- **National evidence-based nutrition standards for foods sold in schools during the school day** outside of the school meal programs, including those in vending machines, school stores, and a la carte;
- **Strengthened local school wellness policies** that require school districts to set goals for food marketing, physical activity, nutrition education and promotion, and foods sold outside of meal programs.

At the State & Local Levels

There are also many ways that state and local governments can improve nutrition and increase physical activity through policy change.

- **Daily, quality physical education** for students in grades K-12 provides them with structured physical activity and the information and skills to be physically active throughout their lifetimes. Physical education should be required for all students and supplemented with additional school-based physical activity opportunities, such as recess, physical activity in the classroom, classroom breaks, intramural sports, and walk-to-school programs.
- **School nutrition standards** set through federal regulations provide a national baseline, but will not apply to foods sold in schools outside of school hours and has other exemptions that states and localities may address.
- **Food and beverage marketing** influences children's food and beverage beliefs, preferences, and consumption decisions. The marketing to youth of unhealthy foods and beverages should be curtailed, including being prohibited in schools and other youth-focused venues.
- **Increased funding for research and evidence-based interventions** to improve nutrition, increase physical activity, and achieve a healthy weight is needed at all levels of government and in all communities.

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