

Overweight and obesity - the new epidemic fact sheet

You've probably seen it on TV or read about it already. Overweight and obesity is now a worldwide epidemic. Australia is no exception - it has one of the highest rates of overweight and obesity in the developed world.

The most recent National Nutrition Survey, held in 1995, involved trained nutritionists collecting data such as height and weight from approximately 13 800 people across Australia. This professionally measured data indicated that almost one-quarter of children and over half of the adult population were overweight or obese. In the decade to 1995, the rate of overweight children had doubled and the rate of obese children had trebled.

Since 1998 there has been about a 60 per cent increase in obesity in men and 25 per cent in women nationally⁽¹⁾. A survey conducted by telephone early in 2006 (involving people reporting data themselves rather than it being professionally measured) reported that 62 per cent of men and 42 per cent of women in Australia are overweight or obese. However, self-reported data tends to be lower than measured data (as with the National Nutrition Survey), because women tend to underestimate their weight, and men tend to overestimate their height.

Overweight and obesity now contributes 8.6 per cent of the burden of disability and premature death in Australia - that's now more than cigarette smoking.

This is a serious problem because overweight and obesity increase the risk of many chronic diseases including type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, depression and some cancers.

Because of the obesity epidemic, the burden of disease from type 2 diabetes alone is projected to triple between 2003 and 2023, overtaking heart disease and cancer to become the largest single cause of disability and premature death in Australia. However type 2 diabetes can be prevented if people maintain a healthy weight through healthy eating and an active lifestyle.

(1) Queensland Health. *The Health of Queenslanders 2006*. Report of the Chief Health Officer, Queensland. Queensland Health. Brisbane 2006.