The Causes of Obesity

In recent years, being overweight has become normal instead of abnormal. The rate of increase in overweight and obesity, in children and adults alike, is staggering. The issue of obesity threatens the health of individuals and will place a large burden on Governments, families and businesses through increased health costs, decreased productivity, long term illnesses and disability. Obesity is not a simple issue, solely dependant upon personal willpower. Although at the heart of the problem there certainly is an imbalance between energy intake and energy usage, many different factors contribute to the frequency of obesity. It is generally accepted by health professionals that obesity is caused by people’s natural urges dealing with a changing environment in which there is easy access to energy dense foods and lower levels of physical activity.

While it is a complex issue, it is not an insolvable one. Tackling obesity is about promoting and ensuring healthy and sustainable living for current and future generations. Research suggests that solutions will not be found solely through emphasis upon greater individual responsibility, but through a shift in the thinking of Governments, individuals, families and societies as a whole. Consequently, there is an urgent need for leadership, commitment and vision. Research in the fields of medicine, life sciences, social sciences and economics reveal a lot about the different causes of obesity and some of these will be discussed here.

Biology

We all need food to live and our bodies have evolved to ensure that our needs are met. Hunger is very powerful and compels us to search for food, but unfortunately we have limited ability to resist the temptations that surround us. External factors such as the smell, taste or even sight of food can override our feelings of having had enough and lead to us eating too much. It is widely believed that obese people burn the energy they receive from food more slowly, but research suggests that there are no differences between obese and slim people in this regard. It has also been shown that when over- or underfed, both lean and obese people show similar rates of weight gain or loss. This perhaps suggests that differences between obese and lean people are not the root cause of obesity.

Early Life

Growth in the womb and in early life is determined in the large part by maternal behaviours such as the mother’s diet and how she feeds her baby after birth (i.e. breast or formula feeding). The period after birth is a critical time and factors such as nutrition can have an impact on health risks in adulthood, including obesity. There is strong evidence to show that low birth weight is associated with increased risks of heart disease and diabetes. Less evidence exists of a direct link between low birth weight and
obesity but rapid weight gain in early life appears to be of critical importance. Breastfed babies are at lower risk than formula fed babies of developing obesity in later life due to slower growth rates.

**Behaviour**
Eating and physical activity are two behaviours with the potential to influence energy usage. These behaviours are shaped by our human drives (like the need to feel pleasure or excitement), opportunities such as access to food and the environment around us. It is a generally accepted fact that society has changed, with significant reductions in activity due to lifestyles that feature sitting all day, longer working hours, increases in car use, and the rise of technologies such as computers. Motivations for health-related behaviours are complex. However in modern societies there exists a conflict between the foods people desire (fatty, sweet and salty foods) and the desire to be healthy. There is also a difference between what people know and what they do i.e. most of us know that eating fatty or sugary foods in excessive amounts is bad for us, and that exercise is good for us. However, people tend to enjoy eating these foods and find it difficult to exercise.

**Environment**
Environmental factors can play a role in determining energy intake and physical activity. Our modern society could be classed as an “obesogenic environment”, which is a combination of the effects that our surroundings (the towns and cities we live in) and opportunities (how easily we can access food) have in promoting obesity in individuals and populations. The term relates to the social, cultural and infrastructural (e.g. transportation) conditions that influence our ability to adopt a healthy lifestyle. Availability and consumption of different foods and levels of physical activity are shaped by these environmental factors. Although it is not possible to show a direct relationship between obesity and any single technology, technological advancements such as television, cars and computers have engineered a lot of physical effort out of our lives. It is certainly true that physical activity has declined significantly, with people walking and cycling less and driving more (even for short journeys). How we perceive our environment is important, with concerns about safety, convenience and access to playgrounds or sports facilities being key considerations.

**Economics**
In urban areas and developed economies there are plentiful sources of relatively cheap foods and the price of food influences the food choices we make. In general, cheaper food sources tend to be more energy dense and nutrient poor (i.e. they provide plenty of calories in the form of fats and sugars, but relatively low levels of vitamins, minerals and fibre). Studies on the changes in food purchases have shown that prices for fruits and vegetables have increased, while prices for fats, oils and sugars have decreased. Hours spent at work can also be linked to obesity, with some studies showing a relationship between longer working hours and obesity.
References


