

MEDIA RELEASE

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DISADVANTAGED AUSTRALIANS MOST AT RISK OF OBESITY: REPORT

A report on obesity in Australia paints a worrying picture for the future health of nation, with disadvantaged groups most at risk of becoming ill from complications of the condition.

The VicHealth research summary, released today, contains highlights from nine years of research by world-leading obesity expert Associate Professor Anna Peeters, while she was VicHealth's research fellow from 2004 to 2013.

It surmises that obesity levels will reach a crisis point in a decade unless a whole of community and government approach is adopted. Multiple strategies, policies and programs will be needed to turn the tide as Australia is now home to the world's fastest increasing rate of obesity.

By 2025, an estimated 83 per cent of men and 75 per cent of women will be obese or overweight, some 16.9 million Australians.

Lower socioeconomic groups are now the most likely to become overweight or obese. It is predicted that in 11 years, 44 per cent of people with the greatest disadvantage and least resources will be obese, compared to 31 per cent of those with the most resources.

As well as the higher risk of cancers, cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes, quality of life and the ability of people to carry out essential day to day tasks such as bathing or walking short distances also decreases the more your BMI increases, the report found.

Associate Professor Anna Peeters, now at Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute, said despite our best efforts, Australians were 'fighting a tide' of environmental factors that lead to poor diet and physical inactivity.

"Our research showing that overweight and obesity in middle age will compromise people's ability to live independently in old age has implications for the coming generation of elderly, their families and government," A/Prof Peeters said. "This underscores the importance of increasing our efforts to prevent weight gain throughout life and to support those with overweight and obesity to prevent further weight gain, improve fitness and get appropriate treatment."

VicHealth CEO Jerril Rechter said obesity is without a doubt one the most significant and complicated public health emergencies we now face as a society.

"Tackling obesity is going to take more than asking individuals to change their diet and exercise more," she said. "We need the entire system to support healthy choices, from urban planning that makes physical activity an easy choice, to preserving farming land to secure nutritious food, or changing labelling and marketing of food to protect children, so consumers can see through the spin.

"We can also encourage more physical activity throughout the working day and encourage parents to let their kids walk independently to and from school and around their neighbourhoods. "There is no easy fix but the research Dr Peeters and others have contributed to understanding obesity in Australia gives us more insight into how to create better strategies to combat it."

Recommendations in the research summary include:

- Sweeping changes for sedentary workplaces – a known risk factor for obesity – that promote more physical activity and healthier food choices throughout the working day.
- The Federal Government should consider taxes on unhealthy food and drink subsidies for fresh food, along with more restrictions on advertising junk food to children. Healthy food policies for hospitals and schools should be introduced.
- State and local governments should change they physical environment to encourage regular physical activity, ensure the availability and affordability of nutritious food and introduce/follow municipal public health and wellbeing plans.

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