

Study links obesity and cancer

By Janet McConaughy
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Losing weight could prevent one of every six cancer deaths in the United States — more than 90,000 each year, according to a sweeping study that experts say links fat and cancer more convincingly than ever before.

Researchers spent 16 years evaluating 900,000 people who were cancer-free when the study began in 1982. They concluded that excess weight may account for 14 percent of all cancer deaths in men and 20 percent of those in women.

The study was big enough to back up a fat connection not only in cancers where it has been known for some time, but in eight where it hadn't been widely documented, lead researcher Eugenia Calle said. Calle, whose study is in Thursday's New England Journal of Medicine, said she was surprised the link "really was the rule more than the exception."

A commentary said the study is 10 times greater than the largest previous research on the topic. Top researchers in both cancer and obesity said the research virtually proves they are linked.

"Because of the magnitude and strength of the study, it's irrefutable," said Dr. Donna Ryan, head of clinical research at the Pennington Biomedical Research Center in Baton Rouge. "It's absolutely convincing. And therefore it's absolutely frightening."

Dr. Robert Mayer of Harvard Medical School and the Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston said it's not certain whether one in five, six or seven cancers might be prevented or better treated if people lost weight.

"What's clear is that large studies of this sort — and this is the biggest and best to date — show very clearly this is a major health problem in this country," said Mayer, speaking for the American Society of Clinical Oncology.

The study by American Cancer Society relied on the body mass index using heights and weights reported by study participants. For instance, a 5-foot-11 person who weighs 175 pounds would have a BMI of 24.4, near the top of the normal range. A 5-foot-3, 175-pounder would be obese, with a BMI of 31.

For the study, a BMI of 18.5 to 24.9 was considered normal. Those who were overweight (25 to 29.9) or obese (30 or over) were all compared to the normal group, and statistical analysis was used to adjust for smoking and other risk factors.

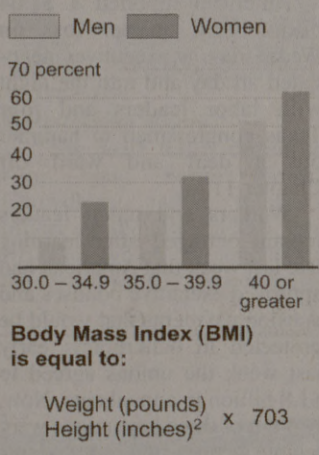
Earlier studies have found that excess weight contributes to cancers of the breast and uterus, colon and rectum, kidney, esophagus and gall bladder. This one also linked it to cancers of the cervix and ovary, multiple myeloma, non-Hodgkins lymphoma, pancreas, liver, and, in men, the stomach and prostate.

The researchers found no link between fat and brain, skin and bladder cancers.

Obesity increases cancer death risk

Obesity may be linked to one in six cancer deaths, a new study says. The study used body mass index, which measures weight against height. For the study, a BMI of 18.5 to 24.9 was considered normal, and an index score of 30 or over was considered obese.

Percent increase in death rates from all cancers based on body mass index score



SOURCE: New England Journal of Medicine

There are two big reasons the overall link is stronger in women than in men, Calle said.

"More women are obese," she said. "And also, breast cancer plays a pretty big role here. That's obviously one of the most common cancers."

Too much body fat can influence cancer and cancer mortality a number of ways. It increases the amount of estro-

gen in the blood, increasing the risk of cancers of the female reproductive system. It increases the risk of acid reflux, which can cause cancer of the esophagus. It raises levels of insulin, prompting the body to create a hormone which causes cells to multiply.

Obesity also makes cancer harder to diagnose and treat. It's harder to see or feel lumps and bumps, and some patients don't fit into CAT scanners, Mayer said.

They also may avoid regular doctor's visits, "possibly because of their appearance or they just shy away from physicians," he said.

"The morbidly obese are harder to operate on, harder to plan radiation therapy for — often, they don't even fit into a radiation therapy machine," Mayer said. He said it also is hard to decide the right chemotherapy dose for the obese, because fat tissue sometimes absorbs the chemicals used in treatment.

Both Ryan and Calle said attitudes must change about weight the way they did about smoking. They said communities, workplaces, schools and transportation all need to change to make it easier both to eat right and exercise.

"We've developed a culture where you have to work really hard to eat right and exercise," Calle said. "We're kind of stacking the deck against ourselves."

"Until we accept that it is a bigger problem than one of individual discipline, we probably won't be too successful in turning it around."

NEWS IN BRIEF

Mosquito disease may help slow spread of West Nile

WASHINGTON (AP) — A disease that kills mosquitoes could be one way to slow the spread of West Nile virus, the Agriculture Department says.

Jim Becnel, a scientist with the department's Agricultural Research Service, said Wednesday that he and a team of researchers have come up with a new method to kill mosquitoes by infecting them with an illness called baculovirus. It works only on mosquitoes.

"It's kind of a killer for a killer," he said.

The department wants companies to make mosquito-killing sprays from baculovirus and put them on the market. They believe it could kill mosquitoes potentially carrying West Nile virus, an illness that killed 284 people and sickened 4,156 in the United States last year.

The agency got a patent on baculovirus in February, but it's up to manufacturers to make commercial sprays because federal law prohibits the government from doing so.

Becnel said scientists discovered the mosquito-killing baculovirus in 1997 but took years to understand how it is transmitted.

FCC doubles airwaves available for emergency use

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal regulators doubled the airwaves available for emergency and public safety workers Wednesday, giving a

boost to police seeking better crisis communications and firefighters wanting to send live feed video from inside burning buildings.

The Federal Communications Commission voted 5-0 to allow local and federal safety agencies to sign up for a chunk of airwaves set aside last year for emergency and homeland security efforts.

Unlike the various slivers of airwaves space devoted to public safety in the past, the new airwaves occupy a single large area well suited to broadband applications like live video.

"The big lesson of Sept. 11 was you have all of these people showing up at a spot because of a national disaster and their devices couldn't communicate," said John Muleta, chief of the FCC's wireless bureau.

Carbon monoxide concentrations reduced in West

WASHINGTON (AP) — Once a far-reaching menace, carbon monoxide emissions from cars and pickups are now a stubborn problem mostly in the West, where weather and terrain tend to trap pollution, the National Academy of Sciences said Wednesday.

Federal air quality standards and tailpipe emissions controls over the past three decades have reduced concentrations of the gas, an academy panel told Congress.

This regulation "has been one of the greatest success stories in air pollution control, reducing the problem, once widespread, to a few difficult areas," panel members wrote.

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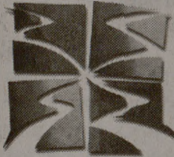
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