

Overcoming Obesity: The Pharmacist Factor

A message to Wisconsin pharmacists from Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson

If you think about the factors that make up our quality of life, so many of them are related to health: energy, longevity, mobility, absence of pain, a strong body, and a healthy family. When we lose any one of those factors, we miss it and want it back.

Preventable chronic diseases like heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, tobacco-related illnesses, and overweight and obesity can diminish all of these aspects of our quality of life.

Despite the fact that Americans are living longer and better than ever, these chronic health problems continue to challenge our best efforts at improving our health and well-being. Obesity, in particular, is one of our country's largest problems. In recent years, even though media coverage of proper nutrition and physical activity has increased, obesity rates have climbed as well. And this is a problem that affects the young and the old, the rich and the poor, and all different racial and ethnic groups.

Today, the United States faces nothing less than an epidemic of obesity. Over the last decade, the national obesity rate has increased by 70%. Today, two-thirds of American adults are either overweight or obese.

Wisconsin is not an exception. When I was elected governor of Wisconsin in the late 1980s, we were the most obese state. In 2001, almost twenty years later, Wisconsin ranked fourteenth. Unfortunately, that did not mean that we were slimming down. We were getting fatter but so was everyone else. In fact, the obesity rate



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among adults in Wisconsin actually increased 91 percent from 1990 to 2002. Now, nearly 60 percent of Wisconsin adults are overweight or obese. Equally troubling, about one-quarter of Wisconsin high school students are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight. We all love our cheese, beer, and brats, but we

are eating ourselves to death.

Obesity also increases the risk for many chronic diseases, including heart disease, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers. And most upsetting, every year 400,000 Americans die from these and other causes that may be related to obesity. Poor diet and physical inactivity are actually on the verge of surpassing tobacco as the leading preventable cause of death in America.

Obesity also affects the health of our economy – it places an enormous financial burden on our health care system. This hurts individual consumers, it hurts employers, it hurts insurance companies, and it hurts the government. The total annual cost of obesity in the United States is \$117 billion. Almost half of that reflects indirect costs such as loss of productivity due to absenteeism, disability, and premature death. A recent study estimates that each year Wisconsin spends nearly \$1.5 billion on direct obesity-related medical costs.

How did obesity become such an epidemic? There is no simple explanation for why rates have risen

so dramatically in recent years, but we do know that among other factors, behavior and environment play major roles in encouraging unhealthy weight gain.

Generally, overweight and obesity begin with an energy imbalance. When you eat more calories than you burn off, you are going to gain weight. To maintain or lose your weight, your calories in must equal calories out. It is that simple.

Over the last 30 years, the number of calories that Americans consume each day has risen, in part because the cost of many foods has declined. More affordable food is a good thing, of course. But along with cheaper and more plentiful food, our lives have become filled with labor-saving devices. From escalators and moving walkways to remote controls and automatic garage-door openers, innova-

Breaking News!

Tommy Thompson scheduled to keynote second general session at 2004 PSW Annual Meeting. **See brochure for more info.**

tions have unintentionally helped create an environment that encourages a more sedentary, potentially unhealthy way of life. Keeping a healthy weight becomes more difficult under these conditions, where a few extra calories a day can add up to significant weight gain over time.

The good news is that in most cases obesity is treatable as well as preventable by modifying individual behaviors. Moderate physical activity and sensible food choices are the two most important healthy behaviors you can adopt. You do not have to run a marathon – just walk for 30 minutes a day. Or go outside and wash your car, garden, rake leaves, or shovel snow. And you do not have to give up cheeseburgers. But eat smaller portions and take everything in moderation. And of course, avoiding risky behaviors is critical to good health.


Unfortunately, as the statistics show, getting people to act on these common-sense prevention messages is easier said than done.

To make a significant difference, we must all work together to promote healthy habits. When it comes to the question of staying healthy, none of us can be neutral. If we have not made an effort to develop the right habits such as

turning the tide. You can help the people of Wisconsin build a basic health literacy that will enable them to make informed decisions about their health and well-being. This is particularly important for customers filling prescriptions for medications that treat heart disease, diabetes, or other chronic illnesses linked to obesity. You can play a valuable role in explaining how simple lifestyle changes in their nutrition and physical activity can help reduce overweight and obesity – and at a cost far less than drugs and with potentially equal effectiveness. I encourage

pharmacists to embrace this frontline role in the larger fight to overcome obesity in America.

Two valuable resources for pharmacists to begin learning more about obesity prevention are the just-released “Blueprint for Action,” which outlines simple action steps to guide individuals toward healthier lifestyles, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s overweight and obesity Web site. I hope you will look at and use both to help communicate this critical health message to customers and colleagues. ●



OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY
INFORMATION FROM THE CDC
[HTTP://WWW.CDC.GOV/NCCDDPHP/
DNPA/OBESITY/INDEX.HTM](http://www.cdc.gov/nccddphp/dnpa/obesity/index.htm)

“PREVENTION: A BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION”
FROM THE DHHS
[HTTP://ASPE.HHS.GOV/HEALTH/BLEUPRINT/](http://aspe.hhs.gov/health/blueprint/)

exercising more and eating healthier, chances are good that we are practicing the wrong habits.

If you and your family practice poor habits, you are susceptible to chronic disease. You will pay in reduced quality of life. You will pay in shortened life span. You will pay in out-of-pocket medical expenses. You will pay in the time you spend at the doctor and in bed when you are sick. You will pay in less time with your children. So when making decisions for yourself and your family, once you know the facts about improving your health, you will realize you cannot afford not to.

Pharmacists can be very effective in