

PRO @ CON ARGUMENTS: IS OBESITY A DISEASE?

PRO Obesity Is a Disease

1. Obesity, like other diseases, impairs the normal functioning of a body. People who are obese have excess fat tissue that causes the overproduction of certain molecules and mediators in the body, which lead to abnormal regulation of food intake and energy expenditure. [3]
2. Obesity decreases a person's life expectancy or can cause death, like other diseases. Obesity in adults can lead to three years loss of life. Extreme obesity can shorten a person's life span by 10 years--comparable to the decrease in years of life from smoking. [4]
3. Some studies have shown that there exists heritability of obesity, therefore obesity is not the result of people lacking willpower to exercise or eat less, but is genetically predetermined. [5][6]
4. Government authorities including the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), National Institutes of Health (NIH), and Internal Revenue Service (IRS) have affirmed that obesity is a disease.
5. Diseases have characteristic signs, according to general and medical dictionaries. [3][7] Obesity has a characteristic sign--excess fat--which is measured by BMI and waist circumference.
6. Obesity is a risk factor for diabetes, hypertension, some cancers, and other diseases. Other risk factors are also defined as diseases, such as hypertension which is defined as a disease because it is a risk factor for heart failure and stroke. [8]
7. Obesity is not just a recent phenomenon resulting from the modern environment. Physicians from as early as the 17th century have referenced obesity as a disease. [9]

CON Obesity Is a Disease

1. Obesity does not necessarily impair the normal functioning of a body as other diseases do. Many people with a BMI in the obesity range are not physically impaired and live normal lives.
2. Unlike other diseases that lead to shortened life expectancy or death, some obese people live long lives and do not develop diseases commonly associated with obesity, such as diabetes.
3. Obesity is a matter of personal responsibility. People become obese because they make bad eating decisions and do not exercise enough or at all.
4. Obesity is the result of sedentary lifestyles and not illness. For example, compared to 40 years ago, people today spend more time commuting, sitting in front of a computer, watching television, playing video games, and generally exercising less. [10]
5. Obesity does not have characteristic signs or symptoms like diseases typically have. The only characteristic sign of obesity is excess fat, which is the definition of obesity itself. There are also no symptoms for obesity. [7]
6. Obesity is a preventable risk factor for other diseases, like smoking is a preventable risk factor for lung cancer or like drinking is a preventable risk factor for alcoholism.
7. Obesity can, in some cases, have positive health benefits such as increasing bone mass and reducing the risk of osteoporosis. [11]

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The debate over whether or not obesity is a disease grows as obesity rates and the cost of treating obesity-related conditions increase in the United States.

Proponents stress that obesity is a disease because it is a result of genetics and biological factors, or illnesses that cause weight gain, including hypothyroidism, Cushing's syndrome, and polycystic ovary syndrome.

Opponents argue that obesity is not a disease because it is the result of a person's chosen lifestyle, eating habits, and environment (i.e. residential location, social circle, economic status, etc.). Obesity is defined as "as a condition that is characterized by excessive accumulation and storage of fat in the body and that in an adult is typically indicated by a body mass index of 30 or greater" by the Merriam-Webster Medical Dictionary online (accessed Dec. 15, 2009). Body mass index (BMI) is calculated by taking a person's weight divided by the square of his or her height (kg/m^2). The "normal" BMI range is between 18.5 and 24.9. A BMI between 25 and 29.9 is categorized as overweight, and a BMI of 30 or above is classified as obesity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported an "epidemic" of 72 million obese people [21] in the United States in 2006 with 34.3% of adults considered obese (vs. 13.4% in 1962) and 32.7% considered overweight (vs. 31.5% in 1962). 67% of the adult US population was either overweight or obese. [18] A July 2011 study by the Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation reported that obesity rates rose in 16 states over the past year, with no state showing a decline. In 2005 obesity accounted for an estimated 216,000 deaths (1 in 10 deaths) among US adults. It was the third-leading risk factor in US adult deaths, after tobacco smoking (467,000 deaths) and high blood pressure (395,000 deaths). A survey conducted by the Gallup Poll from July 8-14, 2004 [24] showed that 21% of Americans believe "obesity is a disease," while 75% viewed obesity as a "problem of bad eating and bad lifestyle habits." As of Dec. 15, 2009, the World Health Organization (WHO) stated that obesity is a disease. In determining whether or not obesity is a disease, researchers have used definitions of "disease" in general and medical dictionaries due to the lack of a widely accepted definition of what constitutes a disease. Other authorities and institution have taken a less clear position in saying whether or not obesity is a disease. Despite the lack of a universally accepted definition of a disease, several government and international entities have stated obesity is a disease. The Food and Drug Administration in its Jan. 6, 1999 "Regulations on Statements Made for Dietary Supplements Concerning the Effect of the Product on the Structure or Function of the Body; Final Rule," [27] wrote that the FDA "agrees... that obesity is a disease."

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