Obesity has reached epidemic proportions in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports more than one-third of US adults are obese. The obesity rates in adults have doubled since 1980 regardless of age, sex, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education or geographic region (CDC, 2009). And nurses are not immune to this condition.

Quantifying the issue

A study of 760 registered nurses found that 54% were overweight or obese according to a 2008 study, “Overweight and Obesity in Nurses, Advanced Practice Nurses, and Nurse Educators” published in the Journal of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners. Forty percent of respondents stated that they were unable to lose weight despite healthy diet and exercise habits and over 43% of the obese or overweight nurses stated that they lack the motivation to make lifestyle changes (Miller et al., 2008).

Zapka, Lemmon, Manger, and Hale found similar findings in 2009. Surveying a sample of 194 nurses from six hospitals, they noted the majority of nurses were overweight and obese. They found that nurses were not actively involved in weight management behaviors such as physical activity and healthy eating habit and recommended hospitals support healthy habits and obesity control.

A world-wide dilemma

In the United Kingdom the issue of obesity among nurses has taken front stage as well. The Department of Health’s report “Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives; One Year On” stated that of the 1.2 million healthcare providers in the National Health System, 700,000 are considered obese. It went on to express grave concerns for the health and well-being of healthcare providers and called on administrators to assist staff lose weight. As a result of this recent study, large scale national programs are being developed over the next year to help nurses and other healthcare practitioners achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

Why the concern?

These studies demonstrate that obesity is a critical condition among nurses. However, it is important to remember the reasons why obesity is of such concern and to examine the health consequences directly tied to this condition. According to the CDC (2009), people who are obese are at higher risk for coronary heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, cancer of the breast, colon and endometrial tissue, hypertension, stroke and sleep apnea.

While many nurses are aware of the health risks associated with obesity, they do not appear to be conscious of the affects being overweight has on the patients they care for. Ironically, nurses play an important role in educating the public about serious health concerns linked to obesity, yet they tend to avoid the subject if they are struggling with obesity themselves. Miller et al. (2008) reported that 76% of obese or overweight nurses surveyed do not pursue the topic of obesity with patients. Nursing has claimed that wellness and health promotion are an important part of their profession, yet many nurses do not set a positive example by following healthy behaviors themselves.
Next steps

This issue of Focus on Health explored the extent to which obesity is a problem plaguing the nursing profession. The next installment in this monthly series will look at the impact of stress on obesity and examine new research paths that may shed light on this ongoing issue.

References


Diane E. Scott, RN, MSN is a Program Director for the Center for American Nurses. For more information on this or other topics addressing the nursing workforce, please visit the Center’s website at www.centerforamericannurses.org.