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THE RESULT OF AMERICA'S DIET: OBESITY

Over the past decade, our country has gotten fatter. It has reached epidemic proportions and there seems to be no end in site. This epidemic is affecting all races, sexes and ages. However, the most affected community seems to be the African American community. Nearly 70% of all African Americans are overweight and approximately 40% are obese. This compares to 29% of non-minorities who are obese. African American women, in particular, have the highest prevalence of being overweight or obese than any other race.

These statistics are alarming due to the higher likelihood of developing obesity-related diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, cancer, and others. People who have undergone bariatric surgery (gastric-bypass) and have lost 100+ pounds have been shown to have improved their health dramatically.

There likely is a strong genetic component that makes some people at higher risk for becoming obese. This may be particularly true in African Americans. This coupled with environmental factors such as diet and lack of regular exercise can lead to this increasing problem.

So what can be done about this? It essentially is about eating less calorie dense foods and moving more. It is important to take stock of your health by visiting your doctor to be screened for hypertension, diabetes, high cholesterol and other illnesses. Two important measurements to know are your BMI (body mass index) and your waist circumference. The BMI is a measurement obtained by dividing your weight by your height. If your BMI is over 25, you are considered overweight. If it is over 30, you considered obese, and over 40 is considered morbidly obese. We also know that the size of your waist line can increase your risk for heart disease. A woman with a waist line is over 35 and a man with a waist line is over 40 is at higher risk. Once you know your risks, your health care professional can make recommendations tailored to your health needs.

One pound is equivalent to 3500 calories. Reducing your calories by 500 a day would allow a one pound of weight lose per week. Increasing your activity level to burn off more calories would further increase your weight loss. This should include both aerobic activity and weights. Not skipping meals is important to stimulate metabolism. Make sure most meals include whole grains, vegetables, low fat or fat-free dairy products, fruit, lean meats and poultry or fish and beans. Limit refined sugars and flours. Drink plenty of water rather than high caloric beverages.

There is much research that is being done to further understand the causes of obesity and new ways to treat it. Be wary of advertisements for weight loss aids that are ineffective over the long term. Currently, surgery is the only proven treatment for obesity. So for now, making modest changes in your diet and activity level can help you avoid or reduce weight gain and ultimately, allow you to live a longer and healthier life.