

# **COST OF OBESITY**

*In*

# **ALBERTA**

*Prepared by*  
Ronald Colman, Ph.D

*With research assistance from*  
Colin Dodds, M.A. and Jeff Wilson

**GPLAtlantic**

December, 2000

## **OVERWEIGHT RATES DOUBLE IN ALBERTA**

### **Obesity Epidemic May Cost Alberta \$700 million a Year**

Rates of overweight conferring a "probable health risk" (BMI = >27) have more than doubled in Alberta, with 29.4% of the province's adults now overweight compared to just 14% in 1985. The dramatic increase is part of what the World Health Organization has called a "global epidemic." Rates of overweight have also doubled throughout Canada, with twenty-nine per cent of Canadians now overweight compared to just 13% in 1985.

Obesity is linked to heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, osteoarthritis, certain types of cancer, and a wide range of other illnesses. A Statistics Canada analysis found that obese Canadians are four times more likely to have diabetes, 3.3. times more likely to have high blood pressure, and 56% more likely to have heart disease than those with healthy weights.

Obese individuals are also 50-100% more likely to die prematurely from all causes than those with healthy weights. Obesity is now recognized by experts as the second-leading preventable cause of death after cigarette smoking. It is estimated that more than 1,500 Albertans die prematurely each year due to obesity-related illness, losing 6,000 potential years of life annually. The findings are included in a new study on *The Cost of Obesity in Alberta*, produced by GPI Atlantic, a non-profit research group that is constructing an index of well-being and sustainable development in Canada.

Obesity-related illnesses cost the Alberta health care system an estimated \$320 million dollars annually, or nearly 6% of total direct health care costs in the province. When productivity losses due to obesity, including premature death, absenteeism and disability, are added, the total cost of obesity to the Alberta economy is estimated at between \$620 million and \$700 million a year, or 0.7%-0.8% of the province's Gross Domestic Product. This compares to the estimated \$804 million in direct and indirect costs due to tobacco in Alberta. Because smoking is on the decline and overweight is increasing rapidly, it is predicted that obesity-related costs will soon overtake the costs of tobacco-related illness.

Only 60% of Albertans exercise regularly (three or more times a week), down by 5% from 1985, and 17% of Albertans either never exercise or exercise less than once a week. Albertans also watch more television than before -- an average of 3.2 hours each day, and they eat out more often. Sedentary lifestyles, longer work hours, rising stress levels, and poor eating habits (including more fast food), may all be contributing to the increase in unhealthy weights.

The GPI Atlantic study suggests that healthy school lunches, nutritional education and physical fitness programs, and brief physician advice to patients can be inexpensive and highly cost-effective ways of controlling the obesity epidemic. In the longer term, the study recommends warning labels and taxes on unhealthy foods akin to current anti-tobacco strategies. Noting the high correlation between stress, long work hours, poor dietary habits and gains in overweight, the study also recommends that the province follow the lead of European countries that have created jobs by reducing work hours.