

COST OF OBESITY

In

BRITISH COLUMBIA

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REPORT SUMMARY

Rates of overweight conferring a "probable health risk" (BMI = >27) have more than doubled in British Columbia, with 26.4% of the province's adults now overweight up from 11% in 1985. The dramatic increase is part of what the World Health Organization has called a "global epidemic." Rates of overweight have more than doubled throughout Canada, with 29% of Canadians now overweight compared to just 13% in 1985. British Columbia still has the lowest rates of overweight in the country, but its rate of increase has been sharper than the national average.

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 2,000 British Columbia residents die prematurely each year due to obesity-related illness, losing 8,000 potential years of life annually. The findings are included in a new study on *The Cost of Obesity in British Columbia*, 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 British Columbia health care system an estimated \$380 million dollars annually, or 4.5% 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 British Columbia economy is estimated at between \$730 million and \$830 million a year, equal to 0.8% of the province's Gross Domestic Product. This compares to the estimated \$1.2 billion in direct and indirect costs due to tobacco in British Columbia. Because smoking is gradually declining and overweight is increasing rapidly, it is predicted that obesity-related costs will soon overtake the costs of tobacco-related illness.

British Columbia has the highest rate of physical activity in the country, but 35% of B.C. residents still do not exercise regularly (three or more times a week) and 16% either never exercise or exercise less than once a week. B.C. residents watch an average of 3 hours of television each day, and eat out more often than they used to. One-third of the average B.C. food budget is now spent on restaurant food, the highest rate of eating out in the country, an increase of nearly 50% since 1982 when just 22% of the average food budget was spent eating out. 26% of B.C. residents experience high levels of chronic stress. 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.