

COST OF OBESITY

In

QUEBEC

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GPIAtlantic

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OVERWEIGHT RATES DOUBLE IN QUEBEC Obesity Epidemic Estimated to Cost Quebec \$1.5 Billion a Year

Rates of overweight conferring a "probable health risk" have more than doubled in Quebec, with 26.5% of the province's adults now overweight compared to just 11.4% 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 the U.S. and Canada, and Quebec still ties with British Columbia as having the lowest rates of overweight in the country. Twenty-nine per cent of Canadians are overweight.

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 as likely to have diabetes, 3.3 times as likely to have high blood pressure, and 56% more likely to have heart disease.

Obese individuals are also 50-100% more likely to die prematurely from all causes than those with healthy weights, and overweight is now recognized by experts as the second-leading preventable cause of death after cigarette smoking. It is estimated that more than 4,000 Quebec residents die prematurely each year due to obesity-related illness, losing 16,000 potential years of life annually. The findings are included in a new study on *The Cost of Obesity in Quebec*, produced by GPI Atlantic, a non-profit research group that is constructing an index of well-being and sustainable development.

Obesity-related illnesses cost the Quebec health care system more than half a billion dollars annually, or 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 Quebec economy could be as high as \$1.5 billion, or close to 1% of the province's Gross Domestic Product. This compares to the estimated \$2.8 billion in direct and indirect costs due to tobacco in Quebec. Because smoking is on the decline and overweight is increasing rapidly, it is estimated that obesity-related costs will soon overtake the costs of tobacco-related illness.

Citizens of Quebec are more sedentary than most other Canadians, with only half exercising regularly (three or more times a week) and more than one quarter either never exercising or exercising less than once a week. Quebec residents also have the highest rate of television viewing in the country, watching nearly four hours per day, or half an hour more than other Canadians, a habit that may be linked to 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. It also notes the high correlation between stress, long work hours, poor dietary habits and gains in overweight, and it recommends that the province follow the lead of European countries like France, that have created jobs by reducing work hours.