

FOOD: THE WAY TO HEALTH OR DISEASE

The relationship between food and health is an old one. Food in recent times has become a problem for the “have's” and “have-nots”. Millions of children, mothers and elderly die or become disabled by under nutrition due to famines, poverty, disasters or wars. On the other hand millions of people die of eating more than they need or eating the wrong food. The Gulf States are no exception.

The prevalence of overweight and obesity are on the increase throughout the developed and developing countries including Saudi Arabia. Obesity became the most common syndrome highly related to most common chronic illnesses such as, diabetes mellitus, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, musculo-skeletal diseases, etc.¹⁻⁶ If this problem is not addressed it will have serious implications on population health and health services expenditure in the coming decades. Weight reduction for obese people have been shown to result in improvements in quality of life and reduction in morbidity.⁷⁻⁹ Behavioral therapy, diet control, exercise and drug treatments have all been shown to be effective, to some extent, in treating obesity and overweight in adults.¹⁰

Ironically it is this part of the world which treasure a wealth of heritage on food and health. Islamic teachings preach moderation in eating. A verse of the Holy Quran gives a clear directive on eating “eat and drink (freely), but do not excess”.¹¹ A Muslim scholar commented on this by saying that “Allah almighty have put all medicine in half a verse” referring to the above verse. The prophet (PBUH) described himself to be amongst a people who do not eat until they are hungry and when they eat, they do not eat to satiety. In another saying of the prophet narrated by Nasai and Tirmizi, the prophet was narrated to have said, “there is no worse bowel to fill than one’s own stomach”. Razas, the famous Muslim physician who lived in the 3rd Hijri century, emphasized the importance of eating the right type of food as a modality of treatment rather than the use of drugs.

National cost-effective programmes are needed to prevent and treat overweight and obesity in our community. This could be achieved through health promotion by stressing on the Islamic teachings concerning eating habits and promotion of physical exercise. Health professionals, particularly, primary health care team, school teachers and ‘Emams’ in Mosques can play a major role in this.

Dr. Sameeh M. Al-Almaie

REFERENCES

1. Al-Shammari SA, Khoja TA, Al-Maatouq MA, Nuaim LA. High prevalence of clinical obesity among Saudi females: a prospective cross-sectional study in the Riyadh region. *J Trop Med and Hyg* 1993;97:183-8.
2. Ogbeide DO, Bamgboye EA, Karim A, Al-Khalifa I. The prevalence of overweight and obesity and its correlation with chronic diseases in Al-Kharj adult outpatients, Saudi Arabia. *Saudi Med J* 1996; 17(3):327-32.
3. El-Hazmi MA, Warsy AS. Obesity and overweight in Type II Diabetes Mellitus patients in Saudi Arabia. *Saudi Med J* 1999; 20(2):167-72.
4. Kuczmarski RJ, Flegal KM, Campbell SM, Johnson CL. Prevalence of overweight among US adults. The National Health and Nutrition Surveys, 1960-1991. *JAMA* 1994; 272:205-11.
5. Seidell JC. Obesity in Europe: scaling an epidemic. *International Journal of Obesity* 1995;19(Suppl 3):S1-4.

6. Sichieri R, Coitinho DC, Leao MM, Recine E, Everhart JE. High temporal geographic and income variation in body mass index among adult in Brazil. *American Journal of Public Health* 1994;84:793-8.
7. Garrow JS. *Obesity and related diseases*. Edinburgh: Churchill Livingstone, 1988.
8. Karlsson J, Sullivan MSJ. An intervention study of obesity. Four year follow-up of weight loss and quality of life. *International Journal of Obesity* 1997;21(Suppl 2): S122.
9. Narba K, Agren G, Jonsson E, Larsson B, Naslund I, et al. Sick leave and disability pension before and after treatment of obesity. *International Journal of Obesity* 1997; 21(Suppl 2):S24.
10. NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination. *The prevention and treatment of obesity*. York: NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, 1997, 12.
11. Sura VII Araf, verse 31. The Holy Quran.

Correspondence to:

Dr. Sameeh M. Al-Almaie, FFCIM (KFU), Department of Family and Community Medicine, King Fahd Hospital of the University, P.O. Box 40072, Al-Khobar 31952, Saudi Arabia