A Public Health Approach to Decreasing Obesity


The public’s knowledge and attitudes about nutrition and its influence on health have been shown to affect their food choices. Increased amounts of publicly available information linking dietary lipids to heart disease has been associated with decreased consumption of whole milk, eggs, and pork and increased consumption of low-fat milk, poultry, and fish. Although most Americans are aware of the links between health, diet, and physical activity, most do not consider their body weight to be a major health concern. The prevalence of obesity is also highest among people with fewer years of education. School- and community-based health education campaigns tailored to cultural background, gender, and age group as well as health messages widely disseminated in the entertainment and news media can help correct misperceptions that contribute to obesity as well as promote healthy behavior.

Attempts to decrease obesity that focus primarily on changing individual behavior have been ineffective. Last year, more than half of Americans attempted weight loss or maintenance through dieting and spent more than $33 billion on products and services. Nonetheless, obesity rates continue to increase and have doubled since 1980. In order to decrease the prevalence of obesity, a multifaceted public health approach is required to address the many behavioral, sociocultural, and environmental factors that promote caloric intake and discourage physical activity among Americans. In 2001, a Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity was issued to provide the framework for such an approach. The strategy outlined above can help coordinate the efforts of public and private organizations working in partnership to achieve the broad range of changes needed to prevent and reduce obesity in the United States.

REFERENCES