Are you Overweight and what can you do about it ?

I understand that this article will never see the light of day if it’s a big turn off, and also that overweight and obesity are neither popular or easy topics. The standard introduction would usually be to depress you with some heavy duty statistics, and catastrophise extravagantly on the accumulating costs to society regarding the epidemic of overweight in our society. We’ll leave all this at 1 in 4 children, and 3 out of 4 adults in Ireland are overweight or obese.

A starting point

Are you, or people that your care for, overweight ? Do you know this ? What can you do about it ? How can we usefully improve our collective response to this, which, together with climate change, inequality and political instability are among the greatest contemporary challenges we are grappling with ?

Most people who attend GPs are quite vague about their weight – are you ? Overweight is a ‘modifiable risk factor’ for diabetes, hypertension, depression, arthritis and many types of cancer – so, it would probably be better if you were not vague about it. You should know, beyond a vague feeling, (‘my clothes don’t fit as well’) if you are or are not overweight. This is even more important for any children you have any responsibility for, and it also remains important for older people, who will have a tougher time of it, if their weight drifts up as they age. .

The best way to determine if you are overweight, and need to act on this, is by use of a dreadfully old and unsexy piece of technology – aka the Weighing Scales. Adults can easily calculate their own Body Mass Index (BMI), with their weight, height and an online BMI calculator – you will find an excellent one on [www.safefood.ie](http://www.safefood.ie).

It’s a little more complicated for children and adolescents, where you need to factor in their age and gender as well, but again, our friends at Safefood have an excellent online Paediatric BMI centile calculator for children and adolescents. If your BMI is greater than 30, or if your child’s BMI is greater that the 85th centile for their gender and age, you need to act. If you don’t know these figures for sure, you also need to act, and work them out. If you can’t do this on your own, you should have a discussion with your Pharmacist, Practice Nurse, Public Health Nurse or GP. This is really important. It is the key first step.

If your weight is in the safe zone (BMI < 30 for adults, and under the 85th centile for children and adolescents), you can be really pleased, and be determined to keep it like this. If your children are among the 1 in 4 who are overweight, or if your own BMI is over 30, you need to act again, and the sooner you act, the more effective you are likely to be, and the easier it will be to make progress with your long term outcomes.

If there is a problem emerging with overweight in your household, it is not easy to solve this, but its important. We have a horrible phrase for this – yours may be an ‘obsogenic household’ ! Even though none of the current strategies are, in effect, a ‘magic bullet,’ several of the strategies we are currently examining are partially effective, and are constantly improving – so get with the plot ! If you are the overweight one, take up the challenge again – it’s really worthwhile, and gradually becoming clearer, which strategies are incrementally effective. On the other hand, the suffering associated with overweight simply compounds as you age. If it is your children, it is better to act now, than take false reassurance, by ignoring the issue.

If you have uncertainties regarding overweigt, read up on it. The Safefood Website is a great place to start. Check out the HEAL program on the HSE Website (**Healthy Eating and Active Living Program**), where you will find clear, evidence based advice you can begin to apply in the running of your household. Raise the issue with your own primary care people (Pharmacist, Community Nurses, GP), and get their advice. Manage your numbers – use that weighing scales.

We recently did a simple study in two general practices with adults. We found, that in this society, where 3 out of 4 adults are overweight, 1 in 3 of them actually didn’t even have a weighing scales, and a further 1 in 3 had one, but didn’t use it correctly. Are you one of these ? In terms of road safety, it would be the same as driving with no regard to speed limits or alcohol levels. It would be unthinkable. But somehow not for overweight....

From Zero to Heroine/Hero......

This will get better, sooner or later, and lets make it sooner.

If you, as they say, are troubled by any material this article, you might care to register for our **Pop Up Summer School**, on **Improving Medical Care for People who are Overweight**. This is in Dublin (Thursday August 29th, 2-6 pm) at The Royal College of Physicians. Registration is free, and suitable for all ages (see full program and register on [www.rcpi.ie](http://www.rcpi.ie)).

The Summer School includes sessions run by People (Patients) and Experts (Clinicians, Scientists, Politicians and Administrators), with opportunity for engagement from the floor, around leading edge evidence on this important (but somewhat unsexy) area of care. What you think about it is important. Health Care professionals find this a challenging area of care, but we are keen to move forwards together on it.

The Clinical Advisory Group for Obesity at the RCPI have detailed recommendations prepared, which we believe are relevant for Ireland now. We are keen to Sensecheck these with you. Your views as a citizen, parent, teacher, healthcare professional, elected representative or younger citizen are important, and we would be delighted if you brought them along on the day.

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