

Obesity, body weight and cancer

Obesity is a major preventable cause of cancer. To back this up, the World Health Organisation (WHO) states that it is the most important known avoidable cause of cancer after tobacco.

Current levels of obesity in the UK could lead to around 19,000 cases of cancer each year. This number is only going to increase in the future, since more cancers are being linked to obesity and the numbers of overweight people are increasing.

The fat tissues in overweight people produce more hormones and growth factors than those in people of a healthy weight. High levels of some of these hormones, including oestrogen and insulin, can increase the risk of certain cancers.

Research has shown that many types of cancer are more common in people who are overweight or obese, including:

- Breast cancer, in women after the menopause
- Bowel cancer
- Womb cancer
- Oesophageal (food pipe) cancer
- Pancreatic cancer
- Kidney cancer
- Gallbladder cancer

This list includes two of the most common types of cancer, and three of the hardest to treat.

Studies have estimated that being overweight accounts for a quarter of kidney and gallbladder cancers.

And there is more and more evidence that being overweight or obese could increase the risk of many other types of cancer including:

- Brain cancer
- Leukaemia
- Liver cancer
- Multiple myeloma
- Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma
- Ovarian cancer, before the menopause
- Aggressive prostate cancer
- Thyroid cancer

Your body shape is important as well as your weight. Studies have found that people with larger waists or waist-to-hip ratios have higher risks of breast, bowel, kidney and pancreatic cancer.

Keeping a healthy body weight is the second best way to reduce your chances of getting cancer, after quitting smoking.

References

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