Maintaining a healthy weight especially important for African-American women

Posted by Dr. Esa M. Davis/Case Western Reserve University  March 18, 2009 00:00AM

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Maintaining a healthy weight is a part of living a health lifestyle and one of the most effective ways to reduce the risk of developing many chronic and fatal diseases. Part of living a healthy lifestyle is to maintain that healthy weight.

A healthy weight consists of being "physically fit" — not necessarily being thin. Thin does not mean healthy. A healthy weight is determined by body mass index, which measures the amount of excess fat tissue.

Having a body mass index between 19 and 25 is the normal range.

One can also measure their waist to get an idea of the amount of excess fat that is stored around the organs. Men should have a waist less than 40 inches and women should have a waist less than 35 inches. Having waist larger than that or a BMI over 30 is unhealthy and can increase a persons chance for heart disease and diabetes.

Maintaining a healthy weight is one of the most difficult health challenges faced by Americans today. In fact, among Americans the rates of obesity, particularly children, have never been higher. Obesity may lead to such problems as type 2 diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, high cholesterol and cancer.

Who is at risk?

Obesity is a problem that affects every community. Several factors may be the cause of this trend. These factors include:

• Culture
• Environment
• Behavioral
• Genetic
• Socioeconomic status

Socioeconomic status is one of the major factors of obesity across all ethnicities. Generally, people of low socioeconomic status are at greater risk for obesity. One reason is because unhealthy food tends to be cheaper and exercise facilities are usually not affordable or available.

Why African-American women have a greater risk

As a group, African-American women have the highest percentage of overweight/obesity in the United States. Three out of four African-American women are either overweight or obese.

The reasons are still unclear. Some factors that may contribute are as follows:
• Culture: African-American women are less likely to participate in weight loss programs and are less likely to exercise. Cultural events and beliefs about food influence a woman's ability to make healthy choices or eat healthy foods. For example, church events and social meetings tend to involve a lot of "soul food" or food that is high in fat, salt and calories.

• Genetics: African-American women tend to have slower metabolism than those of other ethnic groups. However, this does not excuse them from being overweight. Through proper weight management techniques, they can stay within healthy limits.

What You Can Do

The key to successfully losing excess weight is through small steps. Remember that overweight/obesity developed over a long time and thus will take time to take the weight off. Some helpful things that one can do are:

• Create daily meals plans; know what you are going to eat in advance

• Eat smaller portions of food

• Eat healthier food such as fruits, vegetables, low fat dairy

• Exercise at least 30 minutes for 3 times a week

• Consult a counselor about how to change diet plans

• Do a weight-loss program with a some kind of support (family member, friend, coach)

Making exercise easier

Exercise is one very important strategy to losing and maintaining weight that most women, but especially African-American women, do not engage in regularly.

Some reasons for not exercising are: it's expensive and complicated, it's hard to find the time, haircare issues, or I feel tired when I come home.

• Expense: Exercise can be done simply and easily -- there is no need for expensive gym memberships or equipment.

• Time: Exercise can even be done in 10 to 15 minute intervals throughout the day; if one has children, then going for a walk with them for 15 - 30 mins in the evening helps everyone get physical activity.

• Haircare: Haircare tips include wearing either a short or natural hairstyle or if have longer hair wearing it in a ponytail with a sweatband across the hairline.

• Tiredness: Exercise is the best cure for feeling tired and fatigue; it relieves stress and re-energizes.

Making favorite foods healthy

There are numerous sources for recipes of soul foods that are healthy. Listed below are a few to get you started:

The American Heart Association publishes Healthy Soul Food Recipes. Here's some samples.

• Hot-Wing-Flavored Chicken with Ranch Sauce

• Shrimp Gumbo

The American Diabetes Association publishes Month of Meals: Soul Food Selections.

Tags: BMI, body mass index, NetWellness, obesity, weight loss

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