

Sameshni Moodley



SA has the highest overweight and obesity rate in sub-Saharan Africa, with a staggering 40% of women being classified as obese, maintains Dr Vash Mungal-Singh, CEO of the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA (www.heartfoundation.co.za). And this is no longer just an adult problem: one in four girls and one in five boys aged two to 14 are also currently overweight or obese. "Obesity is associated with a number of diseases, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, hypertension [high blood pressure], joint pain, pulmonary diseases and certain cancers," she explains. "There are many reasons for this epidemic, so it's difficult to pinpoint just one. However, there's no doubt that our lifestyles are largely to blame, because the fact is that South Africans eat too much, drink too much alcohol and don't move enough."

Dr Celeste Naudé, a registered dietician and senior researcher at the Centre for Evidence-based Healthcare at the University of Stellenbosch, agrees. "The reasons for the obesity epidemic in our country (and the world) aren't only about individual eating behaviour. There are many

THE FAT OF THE MATTER

Approximately 70% of South African women and one-third of South African men are currently classified as either overweight or obese, putting them at high risk of developing serious health problems. We check out this huge issue

Written by Lynne Gidish

factors at play that result in people consuming more food energy (measured in kilojoules) than their bodies use."

Urbanisation is another contributor, adds registered dietician Nicola Walters (www.nutritionalsolutions.co.za). "Research indicates that a nutrition transition from a traditional to a Westernised diet results in the consumption of more fast food which is high in salt, sugar and fat. In addition, the larger portion sizes of convenience food have led to an increase in overall energy intake, which – together with a sedentary lifestyle – contributes to excess weight gain."

IT'S ALL ABOUT QUALITY – AND QUANTITY A study published in the *Bulletin of the World Health Organisation* last year looked at the food energy supply and obesity rates in 69 countries and found that in most of them, food energy has increased enough over the past four decades to explain the concurrent increase in body weight, says Naudé. "The study showed that over-supply of available kilojoules is a likely driver of their over-consumption, resulting in weight gain. One of the biggest contributors to the increase in obesity is the globalisation of food systems that promote this over-consumption of energy-dense, nutrient-poor, ultra-processed foods and beverages – and those are the ones which are most available, accessible and affordable in the environments in which we live, work and play."

Naudé maintains that while we all bear some responsibility for our own health and eating choices, environmental factors also play a role, exploiting biological, psychological, social and economic vulnerabilities that promote over-indulgence in unhealthy food. "One of the ways that this can change," she says, "is through regulatory actions from governments, combined with joint efforts

from industry and civil society, to create healthier food systems which will help all people make healthier food choices."

DITCH THE DIET The key to long-term, sustainable weight loss is quite simple: ditch the diet! Consistent findings in all weight loss trials prove that it's adherence which is most strongly associated with weight loss success – and the only way to achieve that, says Walters, is through an individually tailored eating plan. One size *doesn't* fit all. "There are a number of risks associated with following fad diets because not only are they unsustainable, but there often isn't enough science to support their safety and efficacy. The Banting diet is still very popular, despite the fact that a scientific study conducted by researchers from Stellenbosch University in 2014 found no difference between weight losses in people following low-carbohydrate diets such as Banting and in those who followed balanced eating plans."

Naudé offers the following tips for successful weight loss, which she says is all about making small, but effective dietary changes that are easy to maintain:

- **Set up your personal environments for success.** Don't keep high-energy, unhealthy snack foods in your home or office.
- **Watch your portion sizes.**
- **Listen to your body.** Stop eating when you're full.
- **Choose wholesome, fresh foods first.** Avoid highly processed ones.
- **Don't be overly restrictive.** Allow yourself a little indulgence every now and then, but not too often – or too much!

REAL-LIFE STORIES

SAMESHNI MOODLEY (34), an account manager in the insurance industry "At the age of 12, I weighed 80kg. Since then I've been on every conceivable diet –

shakes, pills, you name it – in search of a quick fix, with little success. Because of my yo-yo dieting, I was never able to maintain any weight loss.

"However, two years ago, I accepted that I'm an emotional eater who turns to comfort food during times of challenge. I consulted a psychologist and a dietician, who changed my life. They helped me identify my emotional triggers and put strategies in place to make the right food choices when my stress levels rise. For the very first time, I'm managing to lose those last difficult kilos and I feel healthier and happier than ever before."

SIBONGILE BRIDGETTE JONGILE (52), Chief Financial Officer: Eastern Cape Department of Economic Development, Environmental Affairs & Tourism "I gained weight after having my children and that, together with my love of fast

OBESITY AND DIABETES

The fact that SA's fast becoming an overweight nation has resulted in an enormous increase of type 2 diabetes, says Dr Zane Stevens, a specialist physician and endocrinologist practising at Netcare Christiaan Barnard Memorial Hospital in Cape Town. "Diabetes is probably one of the most important health issues the world's facing right now and it's driven by the parallel pandemic of obesity. The term 'diabesity' was coined to cover these two serious health issues, where elevated blood glucose levels gradually damage the eyesight, kidneys, nerves and circulation, thereby putting you at high risk of heart attack and stroke. "While genes do play a role in type 2 diabetes, an unhealthy lifestyle (such as lack of exercise and unhealthy eating) is a major contributor too. It's vital to seek medical help at the first sign of symptoms – fatigue, persistent thirst, slow-healing wounds, weight loss, blurred vision, a frequent need to urinate and thrush or genital itching. Once diabetes is diagnosed, it must be actively managed and treated. This, together with the necessary lifestyle changes, will help reduce the risk of complications."

HEALTH NOTES

Sibongile
Bridgette Jongile



food, led to obesity. I suffered from hypertension, had no energy and my low self-esteem affected my personal and professional lives. Over the years I tried every diet I heard about, but nothing worked.

“At the end of 2014 I travelled to Burundi on holiday, which was a huge wake-up call. Everyone looked at me as if I’d fallen from the sky – I was the only fat person around! When I came home, I completely changed my lifestyle by following an eating plan which taught me how to make healthy food choices and the importance of portion control and exercise. I lost 38kg last year, dropping from size 52 to 38, which I’ve managed to maintain. Today I’m far more confident and full of energy. Best of all, my health issues are a thing of the past.” 

MOVE MORE

Being active doesn’t only require making specific times to exercise, but is also about incorporating constant movements into your daily activities – for example, using the stairs instead of the lift or parking at a distance from your destination so you can walk to it. Getting your heart and breathing rates up is pivotal to both health and weight loss, explains Jessica Byrne, a registered dietician at the Heart and Stroke Foundation SA. “Aim for 30 minutes of moderate activity, such as brisk walking, soccer, dancing or swimming, at least five times a week. If your goal is weight loss, gradually increase this to 60 minutes on most days.”

THE SCOOP ON POOP

Poop pills (yes, you read that correctly) are now in the spotlight as a possible way of preventing or treating obesity. With faecal transplants already revealing weight loss in mice, researchers at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, USA, recently launched a clinical trial to study the impact of gut bacteria on weight. Since studies have shown that obese individuals have fewer diverse types of bacteria in their gut than those who are thin, they’re monitoring the impact of transplanting intestinal bacteria from stool samples of healthy, lean people into the guts of those who are obese. The thinking is that when the “lean microbes” start to populate an obese gut, they could reduce the tendency towards obesity.

So can ingesting other people’s poop really make you thin? You’ll have to wait at least a year to find out. But here’s the bad news: when it comes to weight loss, there’s no such thing as a quick fix. So unless you change your lifestyle and eating habits, no magical pill (poop-filled or not) will rid you of those kilos.