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Americans Don't Know Obesity Increases Cancer Risk

Researchers Express Alarm At New Survey Findings

WASHINGTON, DC -- Speaking at a press conference at the AICR/WCRF International Research Conference on Food, Nutrition and Cancer, Professor W.P.T. James, chairman of the International Obesity Task Force, said, "We are used to thinking about the obesity epidemic on one hand and the cancer epidemic on the other. We need to think of them as linked."

A new survey commissioned by AICR, however, indicates that although Americans are deeply concerned about both obesity and cancer, remarkably few are aware of the link between the two.

Asked to name major risk factors for developing cancer, only 6 percent of 1,025 Americans surveyed mentioned overweight and obesity. They were more likely to mention exposure to certain chemicals (22 percent), high-fat diets (18 percent), exposure to the sun (18 percent), family history (11 percent) and alcohol (7 percent).

Later in the survey, Americans were read a list of chronic diseases and specifically asked which ones are significantly affected by overweight and obesity. The great majority were able to identify heart disease (89 percent) and diabetes (86 percent) as conditions made more likely by being overweight or obese. Only 25 percent, however, were aware that overweight and obesity increase cancer risk.

Citing a report issued by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, an agency of the World Health Organization, James estimated that being overweight and inactive accounts for one-quarter to one-third of worldwide cases of breast cancer, colon cancer, endometrial cancer, kidney cancer and esophageal cancer. "That's somewhere between 102,000 and 135,000 cases in the U.S. alone," he said.

This link is important, James noted. "People need to be aware of it if they are to take steps to reduce their risk of getting cancer," he said.

Conversely, the rapid increase in the number of people who are obese in the U.S. and worldwide could have a dire long-term effect on cancer rates. Unless people take the necessary steps, James said, we are headed for a steep escalation in cancer cases.

James reported that one billion people are overweight (Body Mass Index over 25) and, of that group, 300 million are obese (Body Mass Index over 30) worldwide. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 61 percent of American adults are now classified as overweight or obese and 27 percent are considered obese.

Conducted between June 27 and June 30, 2002, the Harris survey entailed polling 1,025 adults aged 18 and over, using an unrestricted Random Digit Dialing technique that significantly reduces bias and ensures that respondents with both listed and unlisted telephone numbers are reached. The margin of error for the total sample is 3.1 percent.

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The American Institute for Cancer Research (AICR) is the nation's third largest cancer charity, focusing exclusively on the link between diet and cancer. The Institute provides a wide range of education programs that help millions of Americans learn to make dietary changes for lower cancer risk. AICR also supports innovative research in cancer prevention and treatment at universities, hospitals and research centers across the U.S. The Institute has provided over \$62 million in funding for research in diet, nutrition and cancer. AICR's Web address is www.aicr.org. AICR is a member of the World Cancer Research Fund International.