

Obesity rising in Europe, especially in children

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Budapest (Reuters) - The number of overweight people in Europe is rising and there is an especially worrying trend of increasing childhood obesity and in the number of people who are grossly obese, according to recent studies.

Europe is facing major health and social burdens and the rise in obesity is reaching "epidemic" proportions, the 15th European Congress on Obesity in Budapest was told on Sunday.

Estimates show there are around 1.1 billion overweight people in the world, of whom 312 million are obese, and that in Europe 10-20 percent of men are obese and almost half the population is overweight.

Some 30 percent of children in Britain are obese or overweight, and percentages are rising in southern Europe, while in new European Union states in eastern Europe, rates of obesity are surging at a time when health spending is being curtailed.

"More than 80 percent of children who are already obese will stay obese as adults," said Martin Fried of Prague's Charles University, who authored a major study on the effect of surgery on obese patients.

Fried estimates that there are around 11 million Europeans who are grossly obese, with a body mass index of 40 or more.

Body mass index (BMI) is a measure of body fat based on height and weight in which normal weight is in a BMI range of 18.5-24.9.

Obese people are far more likely to suffer early deaths, have health problems like type-2 diabetes, and have a lower quality of life, as well as being unable to participate in work, Fried told journalists on the sidelines of the conference.

Fried said surgery was increasingly a workable solution for obese adults and that far from competing for health resources, it was better than for example continuing to treat type-2 diabetes with drugs, as surgery offered a once-and-for-all solution for 80 percent of cases after six months to a year.

In Britain, which has one of the highest levels of childhood obesity in Europe, a study showed that community-based programs had a major impact on overweight and obese children.

Results of a 9-week trial program conducted by University College London (UCL) and Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children involving 107 families showed significant improvements in BMI, waistlines, lifestyle and self-esteem.

These results were sustained over 12 months, the study said.

"Obesity costs the nation 7 billion pounds a year. This popular community-based program has the potential to underpin effective national strategies for obesity treatment and preservation," said Professor Alan Lucas of UCL's child health department. □