



# WATCHING *the* Waistline

by LIZ CAMPBELL

"It's time to get serious about this country's weight problem. Obesity is reaching epidemic proportions in Canada, and Canadians seem unaware that 'living life large' may have some significant health consequences," says Lynda Corby, registered dietitian and Director of Policy Communications with Dietitians of Canada.

A recent study by researchers at York University, University of Saskatchewan, and University of New Brunswick found that 60 per cent of Canadian men and nearly 40 per cent of women were overweight. Of these, 15.4 per cent of men and 14.4 per cent of women were actually obese, which means their body fat content is greater than 25 to 30 per cent of total body weight. This is ironic given the stress we North Americans have put on low fat diets and exercise.

What causes weight gain? Factors include consuming too much food energy, low activity levels, genetics and body metabolism as well as a host of social, economic and psychological/emotional factors.

Lynn Jackson had just split from her husband when her mother became ill, and she took a year off to nurse her. It was an emotional time with two major areas of her life in complete disarray. Jackson compensated by eating and watching television.

"It was an escape for me," she recalls. "I would get mother settled for the night, then veg out on the couch with movies or TV and bags of potato chips and (chocolate) bars. I looked forward to the evening when I stepped out of my life briefly."

It took only 18 months for her weight to balloon to 222 pounds (size 24) but it's taken her three years to drop back down to 138 (size 12). A nurse herself, Jackson realized fad diets wouldn't work, so she changed her life and her eating patterns. She power walked every morning for one hour, and did weights every afternoon for 20 minutes. And she ate lots of fibre-filled fruits and vegetables with meat, chicken or fish.

Unfortunately, healthy eating and exercise are not habits most Canadians develop at an early age. So what they are often faced with in middle age is taking off fat that has accumulated through decades of poor health management. They may try fad diets or diet pills but some of these have actually been shown to be dangerous to health. And the reality is that few fad diets work; still fewer keep the weight off once normal eating resumes. In fact, while 85 per cent of people lose weight on diets, only 15 per cent keep it off for two years. The key to weight management is to take the focus off weight loss and instead build a healthy lifestyle and body. Most physicians today recommend healthy eating patterns with regular meals which focus on plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables as well

as regular exercise, which has a second benefit of increasing the metabolic rate so that fat burns more quickly.

Permanent lifestyle changes are the only means to guarantee weight loss and ensure it remains off. The benefits of such a regimen are legion – better health, better sleep, improved energy and confidence, and increased self-esteem. And for men, there's an added bonus in that those over 50 who continue to exercise have a 30 per cent lower risk of impotence.

Indeed, there are adverse health consequences to excess weight. People who are obese are at a higher risk of numerous illnesses, including heart attacks, strokes and diabetes. In addition, heart disease, some forms of cancer, high blood pressure, gall bladder problems, reproductive problems, sleeping problems and osteoarthritis have all been linked to excess weight.

Here are some useful tips for healthy living from MediResource, Sympatico's online health site (<http://mediresource.sympatico.ca>):

- Don't diet. Accept your body.
- Focus on other measures of success other than weight. These can include having more energy, feeling more confident, a lower stress level, and sleeping better.
- Make gradual changes, not drastic ones.
- Start the day with a nutritious breakfast. People who skip breakfast actually eat more during the day than those who eat a good breakfast.
- Try to eat something every three to six hours. Leave it too long can lead to overeating.
- Take your time eating. It takes about 15-20 minutes for a "full" signal to reach your brain.
- Do not do other activities while eating. This can distract you from your internal "full" cues and may result in overeating.
- Try to understand how emotions and feelings affect what and when you eat.
- Eat more fruits, vegetables and fibre.
- Don't be fooled by low-fat foods. Although they contain less fat, manufacturers usually add more sugar to make up for taste lost when fat is removed.

Liz Campbell is a Toronto-based freelance writer.

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