

Americans need lifestyle change to fight the fat: experts

July 28 2009, by Karin Zeitvogel

Americans need to change the way they live if they want to beat the obesity epidemic that is robbing the United States of millions of dollars every year and threatening a generation with shorter lives, experts said Monday.

Two-thirds of US adults and around one fifth of American children are now overweight or obese, and the rising rate of obesity in the [United States](#) has had a debilitating effect on healthcare spending, not to mention on health.

Childhood obesity "is the number one public health problem in the country, putting the younger generation at risk of being the first in the history of our country to have a shorter lifespan than their parents," former president Bill Clinton told the "Weight of the Nation" conference.

The conference was the first gathering on obesity organized by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Clinton was representing the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, which aims to significantly cut [childhood obesity](#) by 2015.

CDC officials outlined two dozen steps -- ranging from banning televisions from children's bedrooms to making it easier for people to buy fresh food -- to help beat obesity and bring down related medical costs, which have nearly doubled since 1998.

Eleven years ago, the medical costs associated with obesity were at around 78 billion dollars a year; in 2006, they had climbed to around 147 billion dollars annually, a study released to coincide with Monday's conference showed.

The steep rise in [medical costs](#) was blamed on obesity, which "raises your risk for many health conditions," said Dr Eric Finkelstein, lead author of the study.

A normal-weight person's annual healthcare expenditures are around 41 percent lower than those of obese individuals, said Finkelstein.

"The normal weight individual will spend around 3,400 dollars per year in medical expenditures and that rises to around 4,870 dollars if that individual is obese," said Finkelstein.

The bulk of obesity-related medical spending is not linked to clinical procedures such as bariatric surgery to ward off overeating, but rather to treating diseases caused by obesity, such as diabetes.

"The lion's share of diabetes in the US is caused by excess weight" and the annual cost for treating just diabetes is about 180 million dollars, said Dr Thomas Frieden, head of the CDC.

"Obesity is costly... the only way to show real savings in health expenditures in the future is through efforts to reduce obesity and related health conditions," Finkelstein said.

The way to do that, said Clinton, Frieden and William Dietz, director of the CDC's division of nutrition and physical activity, is to get Americans to change the way they live.

"Obesity is a public health issue that cannot be dealt with entirely in the

confines of a medical office," Clinton told the conference.

"We have to change what goes on in our homes, in our communities, in our schools," he said.

With the average American 23 pounds (11 kilos) overweight and nearly half of the extra 350 calories that are ingested today compared with several decades ago coming from sodas, Frieden -- who spearheaded a successful campaign against tobacco in New York which was largely driven by mightily taxing cigarettes -- suggested a similar tax on sugary soft drinks to curb [obesity](#).

Dietz told a group of schoolchildren from Pennsylvania that 65 percent of US children have a television in their bedroom.

TV sets should be banned from the bedroom and youngsters encouraged to be physically active instead, he said.

Only one of the kids had a TV in their bedroom, none of them liked the idea of taxing soft drinks, but, then again, none was overweight or obese.

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