

New strategic plan for NIH obesity research seeks to curb epidemic

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To combat the obesity epidemic, the National Institutes of Health is encouraging diverse scientific investigations through a new Strategic Plan for NIH Obesity Research.

More than one-third of adults in the United States and nearly 17 percent of the nation's children are now obese, which increases a person's chance of developing many health problems, including type 2 diabetes, [heart disease](#), [high blood pressure](#), fatty liver disease, and some cancers. In 2008, obesity-related medical costs were an estimated \$147 billion. Government, nonprofit and community groups, businesses, health care professionals, schools, families, and individuals are taking action to address this public health problem – and research can provide the foundation for these efforts.

NIH funds research to reduce the prevalence of obesity and its health consequences, an investment of \$824 million in fiscal year 2010, plus awards totaling \$147 million made in the same year through the Recovery Act. This NIH strategic plan, developed by the NIH Obesity Research Task Force, recognizes that eating less and exercising more is easier said than done. Highlighting the crucial role of research in efforts to reduce obesity, the plan emphasizes moving science from laboratory to clinical trials to practical solutions, and is designed to help target efforts and resources in areas most likely to help.

"Obesity has many causes and contributing factors. This plan is a bold blueprint that will encourage the research community to examine the

epidemic of obesity from diverse perspectives," said NIH Director Francis S. Collins, M.D., Ph.D. "Through the scientific opportunities outlined in the strategic plan, researchers can work together toward the goals of preventing and treating obesity, to help people lead healthier and more fulfilling lives."

The task force is co-chaired by Griffin P. Rodgers, M.D., director of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases; Susan B. Shurin, M.D., acting director of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute; and Alan E. Guttmacher, M.D., director of the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. These three institutes, along with the National Cancer Institute, led in the plan's development.

The research recommendations include:

- discover key processes that regulate body weight and influence behavior
- understand the factors that contribute to obesity and its consequences
- design and test new approaches for achieving and maintaining a healthy weight
- evaluate promising strategies to prevent and treat obesity in real-world settings and diverse populations
- use technology to advance obesity research and improve healthcare delivery

To increase the reach of research and improve public health, the plan

also highlights education and outreach to move proven strategies into community programs and medical practice.

Since the release of the first strategic plan in 2004, research produced many advances, including:

- Lifestyle interventions for weight loss reduce risk for heart disease and [type 2 diabetes](#). NIH-funded studies are testing ways to bring these proven strategies to more people.
- When a woman with obesity or [diabetes](#) becomes pregnant, her child's risk of developing obesity may increase, suggesting a critical period to intervene. Researchers can study approaches to help women achieve a healthy weight before and during pregnancy.
- Many genes and other aspects of our biology, from body fat to the gastrointestinal system and brain, influence whether we're likely to become obese. Researchers are delving deeper into these pathways and how they're affected by our environment.

Provided by National Institutes of Health

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