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Weight guidelines are too lax, researchers at Harvard report

Associated Press

CHICAGO - Middle-aged women should weigh far less than most people think, and than the U.S. government recommends, in order to have healthy hearts, Harvard researchers say.

New findings from a study of more than 115,000 nurses strongly indicate U.S. weight guidelines are too lax and encourage obesity in both men and women, the researchers say.

"We found that about 40 per cent all heart attacks that occur in middle-aged women are due to overweight," said Dr. JoAnn Manson, co-director of women's health at Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. She said similar results are found in men.

The study showed that women of average weight had about a 50 per cent higher risk of heart attack than women who were 15 per cent less than average U.S. weights.

And women who gained 10 or fewer pounds in early to middle adulthood had the lowest risk of heart attacks, the researchers reported in today's issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association.

For instance, a 5-foot-6-inch woman had the lowest risk if she weighed less than 130 pounds. At the same height, a weight of 130 to 142 pounds carried a 20 per cent higher risk. At 142 to 155 pounds, it was 50 per cent higher; at 155 to 180 pounds, it was double; and at more

than 180 pounds, it was 3 1/2 times higher than for the 130 pound woman.

"I don't want to be scare people with these findings, but we have been overly complacent about obesity and weight gain in adults," Manson said.

The U.S. federal government in 1990 revised its guidelines upward for desirable weights, saying Americans-over age 35 could be significantly heavier than under 1985 guidelines.

The 1990 revisions were based on life insurance data that failed to account for the fact that many lean people were smokers or had life-shortening illnesses, Manson said.

"The current federal weight guidelines are in a sense encouraging the fattening of America," Manson said, noting that one in three adults is obese. "They're recommending weights that are at least 15 per cent higher than the optimal weights for health."

While cautioning against overreaction to the findings, she recommended increasing physical activity, lowering the fat content and calorie content of the diet and eating more fruits, vegetables and grains.

Increases in body fat are linked with increases in the risk of high blood pressure, abnormal blood cholesterol levels, heart attacks, strokes and some cancers. including colon, breast, ovarian, uterine, and in men, prostate.

How to estimate body weight:

An easy rule of thumb for estimating ideal body weight, consistent with findings of the Harvard study:

For women:

100 pounds for a height of 5 feet, with five additional pounds for each added inch of height.

For men:

110 ~~106~~ pounds for a height of 5 feet, and six additional pounds for every added inch of height.

These ideals might vary plus or minus 10 percent.