The prevalence of obesity among foodservice employees

It has been suggested by health-care professionals that obesity in the USA has reached epidemic proportion. Obesity is assessed by the Body Mass Index (BMI) which is defined as the weight in kilograms divided by the square of the height in meters (kg/m²). A BMI over 25 kg/m² is defined as an overweight and a BMI of over 30 kg/m² as obese (WHO, 2003). Obesity is now the most prevalent disease of children and young adults in the USA. Between 1980 and 1990 alone, the prevalence of obesity in US adults increased 40%. It is estimated that 55% of American adults are now considered either overweight or obese (Science Daily News, October 16, 2000). But the problem is not unique to the USA. The World Health Organization states that:

“...currently more than 1 billion adults are overweight – and at least 300 million of them are clinically obese. Current obesity levels range from below 5% in China, Japan and certain African nations, to over 75% in urban Samoa. ...Obesity accounts for 2-6% of total health care costs in several developed countries; some estimates put the figure as high as 7%. ...Overweight and obesity lead to adverse metabolic effects on blood pressure, cholesterol, triglycerides and insulin resistance. The non-fatal but debilitating health problems associated with obesity include respiratory difficulties, chronic musculoskeletal problems, skin problems and infertility. The more life-threatening problems fall into four main areas: cardio vascular diseases; conditions associated with insulin resistance such as type 2 diabetes; certain types of cancers, especially the hormonally related and large-bowel cancers; and gallbladder disease.” (WHO, 2003)

Since obesity is caused by high calorie intake and physical inactivity it occurred to me that foodservice employees who for most part have constant and free access to food and beverages, might be afflicted to this disease more than other occupational groups. This, coupled with the popular image of “good chefs must be obese” lead me to do some investigation to determine whether the prevalence of obesity among foodservice employees in the USA is higher than their counterparts in other occupations.

In an article written by Caban et al. (2005) the authors analyzed the data on the prevalence of obesity that was collected by the National Health Interview Survey which is conducted in the USA by the National Center for Health Statistics. Since the data included information on employment during the two weeks prior to the interview, the authors were able to compute the prevalence of obesity in 41 occupational groups, including among them foodservice employees.

As I indicated above, I expected the rate of prevalence of obesity among foodservice employees to be among the highest of all occupations but to my surprise, this was not the case. The study showed that for the period of 1997–2002, male foodservice employees had an overall obesity prevalence rate of 18.49% and ranked in the bottom 8 of all occupations. In contrast to this, female foodservice employees had an overall prevalence rate of obesity of 20.10%, and ranked in the bottom 19. The combined male–female rate was 19.49%.

Interestingly, the highest obesity rates for male employees in the above study were motor vehicle operators (31.75%), police and firefighters (29.8%), other transportation except motor vehicle moving operators (28.7%) and material moving equipment operators (28.2%). For female employees the highest obesity rate were noted among motor vehicle operators (31.0%), other protective service employees (30.5%), material moving equipment operators (29.5%), and cleaning and building service employees (25.3%).

Despite the above results, I cannot find solace in the fact that the prevalence of obesity among foodservice employees is lower than what I anticipated. After all, an obesity rate of 19.49% for the period of 1997–2002 means that 996,563 foodservice employees in the USA were obese. Obesity related disabilities cost employers $8720 per employee (Caban et al., 2006: 1618). Thus, the total cost to the foodservice industry is close to $8.7 billion per year. But this is nothing compared to the human suffering and death that is attributed to this disease.

At this point in time there is no silver bullet that can address this problem overnight and the only feasible solution is to design and implement worksite weight loss programs that will educate and help employees to engage in a healthy lifestyle.

References


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