

# The Growing Problem of Obesity in the UAE

Panthayil Babu Rajan, PhD  
Program Chair, General Studies, Higher Colleges of Technology  
Madinat Zayed Colleges, Abu Dhabi, UAE

## Abstract

Obesity is an epidemic in the UAE. The obesity level in the UAE is one among the highest in the world. It is one of the leading health concerns in the country affecting people of all ages. The fat-rich fast-food, sedentary lifestyles, and harsh climatic conditions are the important causes of obesity that creates severe negative impacts on health and wellbeing of people. However, it is a controllable problem. If people cultivate healthy lifestyles and say no to fat-rich fast-food and calorie-rich soft drinks, they can prevent becoming obese to a great extent. Collective efforts by governmental organizations, voluntary organizations, service agencies, media and educational institutions appear to be imperative to offset the growing problem of obesity in country and cultivating healthy lifestyles among people.

**Keywords:** obesity; sedentary lifestyles; fast-food; environmental factors; quality of life; psychological wellbeing.

## Introduction

Health is the most important wealth. Not only health and fitness but the body shape is also viewed as a matter of great concern for people in modern society. There are several factors affect health and fitness of people. Obesity is one of the important factors that negatively influence health and fitness of people at all ages across societies (Kelly, 2006). According to the WHO the term obesity is defined as “abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents risks to health” (WHO, 2006). It is found that at least 1.6 billion adults ages 15 and above are obese around the world. Similarly, at least 20 million children under the age of 5 are also the victims of obesity (WHO, 2006). The Body Mass Index (BMI) is considered as the criteria to determine whether a person is obese or not. The BMI is calculated by dividing the weight of a person in kilograms by the height in meters. An individual is considered to be obese if his/her BMI is more than 30 (Zimmerman, 2005).

Obesity leads to several health problems. It is like a tsunami. Obesity has a significant negative effect on life-span of individuals (Sattar & Lean, 2007). According to Zimmerman (2005), obesity in the U.S reduces of lifespan of children and adolescents by two to five years. The author suggests that parents must establish the right eating habits early in the life of their children as an effective measure to deal with the growing problem of obesity. Obese people are considered to be less attractive and they are subject

to embarrassments (Naidoo & Moussly, 2009). Therefore, it is an important concern of every individual. Although obesity or over-weight is a common term, many people are not aware about the factors responsible for obesity, its consequences and ways to prevent obesity (Naidoo & Moussly, 2009; Zain, 2008). Obesity is an epidemic in the UAE (Baxar, 2009). It is a growing problem that affect both adult and child population in the UAE. The nature of diets and sedentary lifestyles along with the unique environmental condition are the important causes of obesity in the UAE. Obesity has several adverse consequences on health and wellbeing of people. It leads to many health problems that include cardiac problems, diabetics, and problems to the knee. Psychological problems and poor quality of life are the other import adverse impacts of obesity. However, it is a preventable problem. I expect my research will be beneficial to all those who are concerned with health and fitness. It will provide valuable insights on the causes and consequences of obesity and preventive measures.

### **Obesity: A growing problem**

Obesity is an important health issue and one of the growing problems in many societies around the world. Although it is a global concern, it is a burring health issue in rich and industrialized societies. According to the recent estimates, globally, about 1 billion people are currently obese and the incidence of obesity is on the rise. If the current trend continues, the global obesity level is likely to each about 1.5 billion people by the year 2015 (Al Bawaba, 2006). The health professionals and experts in the UAE consider it is an epidemic. According to Baxar (2009), about 71 percent of Emirati population is currently obese. If this trend continues, the obesity level will rise to about 81 % by 2019. An observation by Al Bawaba (2006) also reveals that obesity is alarming in the UAE. It was found that women are more vulnerable to obesity compared to men. While 77.8 % of Emirati women are obese, its prevalence among men is 70.8 % in the country.

### **Background Information of UAE Society**

The UAE is a small oil-rich Arab state located on the Arabian Peninsula. It comprised of seven emirates. Traditionally, a great majority people were fishermen. People also held nomadic life herding sheep and cattle. This small country was not popular almost until mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the discovery and commercial exploration of oil by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century brought about significant changes in the country. The oil boom turned the country into one of the richest states in the world and made profound changes in the lifestyles of people. People in the UAE now enjoy high standards of life. It is a cosmopolitan place with all most modern facilities for living and leisure (Nydell, 2002). The country has several factors to make people obese. People enjoy all luxuries such as air-conditioned houses, modern luxuries motor cars and all other

modern infrastructures. Moreover, the economic prosperity has made significant changes in the dietary styles too. While people in the past predominantly ate fish and Arabic bread, such dietary preference is declining in the country in the modern times. People favor greatly fast foods to the traditional Arab cuisines. Since the country is rich and has become a cosmopolitan place, most of the world fast food outlets have already been established in the country. Eating fat-rich fast food and drinking calorie-rich soft drinks have become part of lifestyles of people in the country. Research on obesity reveals that it is very high in the GCC countries (Olarte, 2009). It is found that Kuwait tops in obesity levels and the UAE ranked 5<sup>th</sup>. The obesity levels in the GCC countries including the UAE are among the highest in the world. It is reported that girls tend to be more obese than boys in the UAE (Olarte, 2009). The researchers warn that obesity level among children is alarmingly high in the country and it is growing. The childhood obesity level in the UAE is much higher than that found in the western countries (Wigglesworth, 2008). Therefore, immediate actions are necessary to offset this important health problem.

### **Obesity: Causes**

The dietary styles are the leading cause of obesity in the UAE (Wigglesworth, 2008). The UAE is a rich country and people enjoy high level of income. Almost all types of food including the fat-rich fast foods and calorie-rich soft drinks are available abundantly in the country. Availability of various fat-rich food and people's affordability to them might have led to people to develop great affinity to such dietary styles. Eating fat-rich food and drinking calorie-rich soft drinks have become part of lifestyles of people in the country. According to Naidoo & Moussly (2009) more than 80 % adolescents in the UAE regularly drink high-calorie drinks leaving for high probability for people developing obesity. Such food is cheaper than the other types of food. Moreover, fast foods are tastier than traditional food that makes it attractive for people to consume it more often. Perhaps, this is the major reason as to why obesity level to reach very high in the GCC countries, including the UAE. An observation by Olarte (2009) has revealed that girls tend to be more obese than boys in the GCC region. The author also found that while obesity level is highest in Kuwait, the UAE ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the GCC region.

The sedentary lifestyles are the other important causes of obesity. People in the UAE do not value much on physical activities. In general, physical activities are not part of cultural practice of people in the UAE. Apparently, the Emiratis are quite unaware of the importance of physical activity to keep people fit and healthy. Therefore, parents do not feel it is necessary to cultivate such habits into the lifestyles of their children and do not pay any conscious to motivate them doing physical activities (Naidoo & Moussly, 2009). This particular issue is quite severe among girls. Since cultural norms of the society do not expect outdoor activities of girls, it is not expected of girl

children playing outside with their friends (Naidoo & Moussly, 2009, Nydell, 2002). It appears that the cultural expectation of the UAE make people less active that leads to high chance for Emiratis becoming obese. Besides, high level of income is another important factor making lazy and lead unhealthy lifestyles. The Emiratis in general enjoy better economic status. The high income level of people enables Emiratis to have one or more servants at home to do the household activities. The availability of housemaids and other servants create a situation that the Emiratis do not require to any works at home that make people less active. Further, better economic status of people is reflected in household facilities in the UAE. It is difficult to find a household in without a private car (Wigglesworth, 2008). The Emiratis invariably prefer using their private cars to go to even walk-able distance that indirectly contributes to accumulate excessive fat on their bodies to make them obese.

The environmental factors are other important factors that contribute to obesity among people in the UAE. Human lifestyles are linked to their physical or geographical environment. People tend to develop leisure and recreational activities according to the suitability of their environment. The UAE environment is quite unfavorable for people to do outdoor entertainments and recreational activities (Zain, 2008). The climatic condition of the country is extremely hot and humid. This harsh and unfavorable season remains more than six months in the country that prevents people from doing outdoor activities. This particular situation is highly destructive especially for children and youngsters who generally love to play outdoor games and sports with their friends. Probably, this problem may be quite severe in urban places. In the crowded urban areas, not only the climate is hostile but also there is lack of sufficient open areas for children and adults to enjoy outdoor leisure activities. These constraints force people to seek alternative means of leisure. In the absence good opportunity for outdoor recreational activities, children and adults in the urban areas generally resort on to indoor games and videogames that do not involve any rigorous physical activities (Zain, 2008). Hence, the hot and humid environmental factors tend to develop unhealthy lifestyles among people in urban areas that make them obese. Besides, the motorized-lifestyles in the urban places is also a contributing factor for obesity in the UAE (Wigglesworth, 2008). The Emiratis are quite rich people. Better economic status of people enables every Emirati family to own private cars. Moreover, the Emiratis, especially in the urban areas, consider travelling in expensive motor cars is a matter of social status. Therefore, they do not make any efforts to walk or use bikes to go to walk-able distances, which create a situation to make people obese.

The leisure and lifestyles of children in the urban centers are also highly prone to develop obesity (Zimmerman, 2005). It is a growing trend among modern-day children especially in the urban areas to prefer hi-tech games to traditional games. Watching television and playing videogames have become part of life of children (Zimmerman, 2005). The traditional

games are more activity-oriented that help children burning away excessive fat from their bodies, the hi-tech games are less-activity oriented, but are more thrilling and attractive for children. Children tend to prefer thrilling hi-tech games to traditional games that create great chance of children becoming obese (Zimmerman, 2005).

### **Impact of Obesity on Health and Society**

The impact of obesity is quite severe on people as it is harmful to their health and wellbeing. An observation by Wigglesworth (2008) reveals that obesity is the one of the principal cause for the number one killer disease heart attack in the UAE. The author informs that obesity in the GCC region is worst in the world (Wigglesworth, 2008). Obese people generally eat fat-rich food and drink high-calorie drinks. Eating regularly fat-rich food causes increase in cholesterol level and hypertension. The fat-rich diets will lead to sedimentation of abnormal quantities of fat in the blood vessels resulting severe constraints for the free flow of the blood through the blood vessels which is the principal cause of cardiac problems. Moreover, obese people are unlikely to do good physical exercises to burn off excessive fat from their body. Daily consumption of fat-rich food along with lack of regular exercises aggravates the chances for heart attack (Wigglesworth, 2008). The other important harmful health impact of obesity is higher levels of diabetics (Kelly, 2006; Gerberding & Marks, 2004). Obesity leads to higher levels of blood sugar on one hand it slows down the activity of the pancreas that helps maintaining normal blood sugar level on the other hand, each of which leads to diabetics. The incidence of diabetics is reported to be very high the UAE and one of the prime reasons for this problem is obesity. According to Gulf News (2007), March 6 one is every five adults in the country suffer from diabetics and a great majority of them are obese.

Problems to the knee and joints are the other important health concerns caused by obesity. The obese people are at higher risks of developing problems to their bones (Naidoo & Moussly, 2009). The abnormal weight of the body causes excessive strains to the bone structure of human body. The obese people especially suffer problem with the knee and joints due to excessive strain caused by abnormal size. The studies conducted by Harvard School of Public Health in the UAE have found that the youngsters drinking high-energy drinks are at high risk of becoming obese and develop problems to their bones. The researchers have indicated that the individuals consume high-energy drinks and obese people have almost five times higher chance of developing problems to their bones (Naidoo & Moussly, 2009).

Obesity has a significant effect on quality of life of people. It causes great harm to psychological wellbeing of people. Obesity it tends to create deep psychological scars on people. Obese people tend to feel that they are abnormal and feel highly uncomfortable and embarrassed interacting with people (Naidoo & Moussly, 2009). They may not be able to find cloths for their size that makes them disappointed. It is

reported that obese children in schools are likely to be isolated and may find it hard to make friends because many body-conscious students look for friends similar to them. Moreover, obese students will not be able to take part in school sports and games the way normal children do. Therefore, obese individuals will feel embarrassed to interact with other people freely. The feeling disturb them deeply that leads to psychological and adjustment problems (Naidoo & Moussly, 2009; Zain, 2009).

### **What is being done to deal with Obesity in the UAE?**

Although obesity is one of the major health concerns around the world, it is a preventable problem (WHO, 2006). In the UAE, governmental and voluntary agencies have taken several measures to deal with the problem. Mostly, the action programs are aimed at children and youngsters. Naidoo and Moussely (2009) reported about the important anti-obesity programs in the country. According the authors, VLCC, Zayed University, Dubai Women's college etc are doing their best to educate people on dangers of obesity. They also promote healthy lifestyles and diets among people. Apart from educating people, these agencies are putting their efforts to ban selling of fat-rich fast food and calorie-rich soft drinks in schools and the university cafeterias. The governmental efforts to counter obesity are also very strong in the UAE. According to Gulf News (2007, March 6), the most important government strategy to combat the growing problem of obesity is organizing community oriented awareness workshops throughout the country. The municipalities are also collaborating with private and commercial sectors to spread anti-obesity messages and organize campaigns to promote healthy lifestyles and balanced diet.

Zain (2009) reported about multi-dimensional obesity prevention campaigns in the UAE. The author indicated that the mass awareness campaigns and personal counseling on the causes, consequences and the ways to prevent obesity are gaining momentum in the country. Both governmental and voluntary agencies are targeting schools, universities and shopping malls throughout the country in order to spread healthy lifestyles and anti-obesity messages. The primary health centers are also reportedly providing counseling services to obese individuals to overcome their anxiety and depression and guide taking the rights measures to reduce body weight (Zain, 2009). It appears that collective efforts are directed to deal with the obesity problem in the UAE, which would certainly do great to offset the growing problem of obesity the country in the long-term.

### **Conclusion**

Obesity is an epidemic in the UAE. It is one of the leading health concerns in the country affecting people of all ages. The fat-rich fast-food, sedentary lifestyles, and harsh

climatic conditions are the important causes of obesity that creates severe negative impacts on health and wellbeing of people. However, it is a controllable problem. If people cultivate healthy lifestyles and say no to fat-rich fast-food and calorie-rich soft drinks, they can prevent becoming obese to a great extent. It is necessary that people must internalize the golden rule that "Health is the most important wealth". Perhaps, people uphold the following slogan - "Healthy food and healthy lifestyles will help you look good, walk good and live good", one can remain healthy and fit.

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