

'Stop the Spread Campaign' Information for Health Professionals

About the Campaign

The purpose of the campaign is to raise awareness among adults that excess weight has become the norm rather than the exception. It aims to encourage adults to become more aware of their waist size and to find out if they are carrying excess weight around their middle and subsequently putting their health at risk. It provides links to resources to help people to "stop the spread" by making simple lifestyle changes and encourages them to support their friends and family to reduce their waist sizes too.

Why is this campaign important?

Excess body weight is the most significant nutritional issue of our times. Carrying excess weight can increase our risk of developing a number of chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes and certain cancers. Excess weight is also linked to sleep apnoea, infertility, stress, depression, gallstones, complicated pregnancy and arthritis. The increased risk associated with obesity varies depending on the pattern of fat distribution in the body, with central/abdominal (visceral) fat deposition being linked to an increased risk of diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers compared with a more peripheral fat distribution.

At present, 2 out of every 3 adults on the island of Ireland are overweight or obese and it is now estimated that approximately 2,000 people in ROI and 450 people in NI die each year from obesity related illness. These figures may, however, be underestimated by as much as 3-4 fold, based on UK projections. This puts obesity on par with smoking as the biggest preventable cause of death on IOI. The problem of overweight and obesity is at epidemic proportions amongst adults across the island of Ireland and looks set to continue growing at a rate of 1% every year.

In the past twenty years men have gained an average of 8kg and women have gained an average of 5kg. Recent studies have shown a steep rise in the number of people who are obese or overweight on the island of Ireland.

Republic of Ireland (ROI):

- The National Adult Nutrition Survey (NANS) (2011) showed that in twenty years there was a threefold increase in the number of men who are obese in ROI and a one and a half fold increase in the number of women who are obese.
- NANS indicated that 70% of men and 52% of women are overweight/obese in ROI. Rates of obesity are similar in NI with 59% of the population overweight/obese.
- Also according to NANS, 54% of men and 64% of women had a waist circumference greater than 37 inches and 32 inches respectively. On the island of Ireland only half of the population have a waist circumference within the 'healthy' range.

Northern Ireland (NI):

- Findings from the 2010/11 Health Survey Northern Ireland revealed that 36% of adults were overweight and 23% were obese. Amongst men, 44% were overweight and 23% were found to be obese. With regards to women It was found that 30% were overweight while 23% were classified as obese
- When asked how they perceived their own weight, only 46% said that they felt they were too heavy when in fact 59% of them were either overweight or obese

United Kingdom (UK):

- The UK's National Diet Nutrition Survey (NDNS) showed that 45% and 23% of men are overweight and obese respectively and 27% and 28% of women are overweight or obese respectively. This also shows that the level of obesity in the UK has also dramatically risen over the last twenty years with data recorded in the 1989 Nutritional Survey of British Adults showing that just 8 and 12% of men and women obese respectively.

As the distribution of weight of the population has grown so has our acceptability of what is a healthy weight. When **safefood** asked a representative sample of adults on the IOI if they were carrying excess weight only one third reported that they were. The reality is that two thirds of us are overweight indicating that many people are unaware that they are carrying excess weight.

Questions and Answers surrounding the campaign

Q. Why is the Campaign focusing on getting people to measure their waist?

A. The simplest way to assess whether you may be carrying excess weight around your middle is to measure your waist circumference.

It is now well established that carrying excess fat around your waist area contributes more to serious health problems than carrying excess fat elsewhere in the body. Changes in waist circumference reflect changes in risk factors for heart disease, diabetes and some cancers. There is an increased risk of metabolic complications such as insulin resistance, high cholesterol and abnormal fat distribution for men with a waist circumference $\geq 94\text{cm}$ (37 inches) and for women with a waist circumference $\geq 80\text{cm}$ (32 inches) (WHO, 2000). These metabolic complications in turn predispose to heart disease, diabetes and certain cancers.

One can also assess whether their weight is in a healthy range by measuring their Body Mass Index (BMI). BMI is calculated by dividing weight in kilograms by height in meters squared. However, BMI does have a few limitations including:

- it does not tell you where you are carrying this excess weight,
- it is more prone to measurement error than waist circumference

Waist circumference is a better measure of body fatness and health risk than BMI

Q: Is the campaign saying that Body Mass Index (BMI) is not accurate?

A. No, BMI is a great measure at population level but it doesn't tell individuals about where the weight is carried – and we know if it's around the waist that it's particularly bad for the person's risk of developing chronic diseases such as diabetes or heart disease. In addition, all measures are open to limitations e.g. a very athletic individual may have a BMI which puts them in the overweight category (as muscle weighs more than fat) but are in reality, healthy. It should be interpreted with caution when assessing an individual's body weight.

Q. How does one measure their waist correctly?

A. First of all, find your waist: Your trouser waist size is not the same as your actual waist size. The most accurate way to find your waist is by feeling the bottom of your ribs and the top of your hip bone and your waist is mid way between these two points, normally where your bellybutton is. A less accurate but slightly easier way to find your waist is to put your hand on your right hand side and when leaning to the right feel the point where there is a dent. Mark this point and stand back up straight. This point indicates your waist.

Measuring your waist

- Wrap the measuring tape around your bare skin or light t-shirt
- Make sure the tape is snug, but does not push in the skin. Make sure also the tape is not twisted at the back and is straight across the back
- Stand with your feet together. If someone is measuring your waist for you leave your arms relaxed, down by your side
- Relax, exhale and measure your waist
- Although it might be tempting, do not 'suck in your stomach' and don't hold your breath when measuring

Irrespective of height, a waist measurement of greater than 37 inches (94cm) for men or 32 inches (80cm) for women is an indicator of increased health risk.

Q. I am curious about the campaign advert. It seems to portray overweight and obesity as some kind of infectious disease which can "spread" from one person to another. What evidence is there to support this statement?

A. Overweight does not spread in that manner. However, social influences and a perception of what is the norm do have an effect on what individuals and society view as being "ok" or even healthy. We are all embedded in social networks and as a result are influenced by the appearance and behaviours of those around us. Research has shown that a person's social contacts (i.e. family and friends) can influence their weight in two ways

- By influencing the food they consume or the amount of physical activity they do
- By changing what they perceive is a healthy weight by comparing their own weight with that of their friends and family who may be overweight and viewing this then to be the norm

It is these social influences which can affect our ideas about what is a healthy size and be associated with overweight being "spread" among close friends and family.

Q. Does the campaign take into account changes in waist size during pregnancy?

A. This campaign is not aimed at pregnant women. However, research has shown that women who have had one or more pregnancies have been found to have a higher waist size than women who haven't had children but this only accounts for a maximum of 1 – 2 inches (2.5-5cm).

During pregnancy a woman's waist is naturally going to expand. For women who started off pregnancy at a healthy weight, their body weight should have gone back to pre-pregnancy weight by one year after they gave birth. It may take longer for those who started pregnancy carrying excess weight. (WHO, 2008; NICE 2010)

Q. Do the healthy waist guidelines take into account the phenomenon of the 'middle aged spread'?

A. Research has shown that waist circumference increases slightly with age. In women, these changes may be due to the menopause when fat is more likely to be redistributed to the abdomen area. However this minimal increase in waist size accounts for a maximum of 1-2 inches (2.5-5cm). Men may also be affected by hormonal changes as they get older and studies have shown that this can lead to an increase of around 1 inch around the waist.

Any further increases in waist size may be due to being less physically active with age older and perhaps having an unhealthier diet compared to when they were younger.

Q. Should taller people have larger waist circumferences than people with a smaller height?

A. For most people no matter how tall you are, if your waist circumference is more than 32 inches for women or 37 inches for men than you are at increased risk of some lifestyle related chronic diseases.

Q. Do genes play a role in a person's weight status?

A. Yes, our genes will influence how predisposed we are to putting on weight but environmental factors i.e. how active we are and what food we eat and social factors play an important role too. It is currently not possible to precisely estimate the level of genetic influence. Emerging research findings indicate that our genes influence our food choices and our ability to control our appetite.

Q. If somebody is over the recommended 32 or 37 inches are you saying that they are obese?

A. No, we are not saying that they are obese. Waist measurements over the recommended 32 or 37 inches are an indication that the individual is likely to be carrying excess weight around their middle which increases their risk of serious health problems such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer more than fat stored in other parts of the body.

Waist measurement is only one part of assessing whether or not an individual is of a healthy weight. Body Mass Index may also be used as a screening tool to identify possible weight problems for adults.

In determining a person's overall health, factors such as blood pressure, smoking status, cholesterol and family history must also be taken into account.

Q. Where can people find more information to help them lose weight?

A. Check out the **safefood** website www.safefood.eu

Further reading

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