

Obesity puts women at risk of heart disease

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Fifty six percent of women and 29% of men aged 15 years or older in South Africa are obese, according to a report released this month entitled 'Heart Disease in South Africa'. By Marion Scher.

Commissioned by The Heart and Stroke Foundation SA (HSFSA) and released by the Medical Research Council (MRC), this report was authored by Prof Krisela Steyn from UCT Department of Medicine.

Women's heart disease also came under the spotlight earlier this year with the HSFSA's announcement that heart disease kills almost six times more women than breast cancer.

The report indicated that amongst women, the highest obesity rates were found in blacks (32%), followed by coloureds (26%), whites (23%) and Indians (21%).

Prof Steyn commented, "Many women are unaware that they are at risk for heart disease and this has dire consequences for their health. It was shown in a recent study in America that women who did not consider themselves at risk for heart disease were less inclined to do regular physical exercise or to lose weight."

The report stated that 'losing weight is challenging but possible with reduced kilojoule intake, regular physical exercise and an understanding and management of the underlying emotional and cultural factors that contribute to overeating.

It also stressed that the current fad of recommending surgery to address obesity for large numbers of South Africans was strongly condemned, as this procedure is very risky and should only be considered for morbidly obese people in exceptional circumstances.

Research shows that active populations had about half the amount of heart attacks and angina than inactive populations. For women, increasing work and domestic pressure means there is limited time for exercise.

Shân Biesman-Simons, HSFSA Director of Nutrition and Education, said, "We need to take responsibility for the health of our hearts and where necessary modify our lifestyle and that of those close to us. More activity and healthier food choices will make a huge difference to these alarming statistics. It is also never too early or too late to make lifestyle changes."

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