

East Meets West

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This is the next in a series of articles designed to compare and contrast Eastern and Western approaches to common clinical conditions. This month's article will focus on obesity.

Background

According to the 1999-2000 National Health and Nutrition Survey, 67% of U.S. adult men and 62% of U.S. adult women are overweight or obese. Approximately 10.4% of children ages 2 to 5, and 15% of the youth ages 6 to 19 are obese. These young people have a 50% chance of being obese as an adult if they are overweight at age 6. Whether to classify a person as overweight or obese is based on the body mass index (BMI). The BMI is often read off of a chart or calculated by the following formula:

$$\text{BMI} = \frac{\text{weight in pounds}}{(\text{height in inches})^2} \times 703$$

A BMI between 25 and 29.9 defines being overweight, the weight range shown to have a significantly higher risk of health problems. A BMI equal to or greater than 30 is considered obese, the weight at which the risk of death is higher. Excess weight poses increased risk for diabetes, heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, various cancers, high cholesterol, sleep apnea, arthritis, asthma, and gallbladder disease. Americans are spending much effort and money fighting the “battle of the bulge” to look good and to stay healthy.

Western medical treatment for obesity

To achieve weight loss, one first must set a reasonable, achievable goal. Occasionally the physician will test for co-existing conditions, such as hypothyroidism, that might contribute to the problem. However, the foundation for any weight loss program is lifestyle modification—exercise and diet. It takes 3,500 calories to lose or to gain a pound of body fat. A decrease of 500 to 1,000 calories per day can lead to a 1 to 2 pound loss per week. Somebody once calculated that eating one spoonful of food less every meal could result in an 11-pound weight loss every year. Two prescription drugs available as weight loss tools are sibutramine (Meridia) and orlistat (Xenical). Sibutramine induces satiety by affecting brain chemicals norepinephrine and serotonin. This drug has been shown to decrease body weight by 5-10%. Orlistat blocks the intestinal absorption of 30% of ingested fat, the most concentrated form of calories. However, this drug does not suppress appetite. Various stimulants, both over-the-counter and prescription, are available for short-term use as appetite suppressants. For more aggressive weight loss, especially if the BMI is greater than 40 or is

greater than 35 with coexisting health conditions, surgical options like the gastric bypass are available. Your doctor can help decide what course of action is most appropriate for you. The challenge is often not only losing weight, but also living a healthy lifestyle to prevent gaining the weight back.

Chinese medicine and obesity

The ancient Chinese recognized improper eating habits and a lack of physical exercise as two causes of disease. They emphasized the importance of eating the appropriate types of food, in the proper amounts and at the proper time. In fact, the patient's diet is always taken into consideration by the clinician in assessing the patient's condition. Similarly, dietary recommendations are often given along with the therapy. The Chinese classified foods into the type of effect they have on the body. They observed that many foods cause an accumulation of pathogenic factors which then impair the proper functioning of the body's organs and vessels. For example, consumption of excess alcohol, greasy or oily food or sweets causes an accumulation of "dampness" and "heat" in the body. This can manifest in a variety of ways, including digestive disorders such as acid reflux, stomach pain, vomiting, diarrhea, or abdominal pain. Long-term accumulation of dampness leads to obesity. These pathogenic factors are then addressed in the treatment through acupuncture and herbal therapy.

Physical exercise was also stressed as essential in order to maintain health. A lack of exercise leads to impairment of the body's muscles, organs and vessels. Tai-chi-chuan, one form of physical exercise, is practiced daily by millions of Chinese. Tai-chi is often recommended by doctors of Chinese medicine because of its benefits to the muscles, joints, heart and brain. It involves fluid-like movements of the body that promote blood circulation, relaxation, coordination, proper breathing, and a sense of wellness.

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