EC Nutrition Special Issue - 2017

Diet and Obesity Among Filipino Americans: Its Impact to Health

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Received: November 21, 2017; **Published:** November 29, 2017

Defining Obesity

Overweight and obesity are classified using the body mass index (BMI). In the United States (U.S), overweight is defined as a BMI ≥ 25 kg/m^2 to < 30 kg/m^2 and obesity, a BMI of ≥ 30 kg/m^2 [1]. Using this guideline, Asian Americans have low overweight and obesity rate compared to non-Hispanic Whites (NHW), African Americans and Hispanics. In 2011-2012, the adult obesity prevalence rate was 34.9%, but only 10.9% among the Asian population [2].

However, studies have shown that Asians generally have a higher percentage of body fat compared to NHW of the same age, sex, and BMI [3]. In 2004, the World Health Organization (WHO) expert consultation reviewed the need for the Asian population to have different BMI cut-off points [3]. The WHO proposed lowering BMI cut-off points for Asians to define overweight as a BMI ≥ 23 kg/m^2 to < 27.5 kg/m^2 and obesity as BMI > 27.5 kg/m^2 [3,4].

Using the Asian BMI, studies have shown a significant increase in overweight and obesity among the Asian population [5,6]. Studies have consistently reported that among the Asian subgroups, overweight and obesity were highest among Filipinos Americans. When using the Asian guideline, the Filipino American combined overweight/obesity prevalence rate (78.6%) was higher than NHWs (53.8%), African Americans (64.9%) and Hispanics (69.7%) [7]. The obesity rate for Filipino American men (34.5%) was similar to the national obesity rate [8].

Filipino American Diet

Diet plays an important role in obesity. There are very few studies on Filipino American diet. However, all studies have shown a change in the dietary intake of Filipino immigrants. The most common dietary change noted among Filipino Americans is the increased consumption of meat and fat [9]. The studies showed increased intake of beef, pork, chicken, dairy products and fast foods.

Three dietary studies included participants' BMI, using the U.S. standard guideline [10-12]. For women, the mean BMI was within normal range (23.5 kg/m^2 - 24.9 kg/m^2), however, about 40% were considered overweight or obese [10-12]. For men, the mean BMI was in the overweight category (26.4 kg/m^2 - 26.7 kg/m^2) with over 60% considered overweight or obese [10,12].

Two studies investigated the correlation between dietary acculturation with overweight/obesity. Both studies showed that the Western dietary acculturation had a significant correlation with increased BMI and waist circumference [11,12].

Diet and Obesity Related Health Risks

Obesity and an unhealthy diet are risk factors that lead to chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease (CVD), diabetes and hypertension (HTN). Filipino Americans have a high rate of CVD and Filipino women had a higher rate for stroke compared to non-Hispanic White Americans [13]. Filipino Americans also have increased CVD risk factors including HTN, diabetes and metabolic syndrome [14].

Increased prevalence rate of HTN in the Filipino American population is well documented. Filipino Americans have the highest rate of HTN among all Asian subgroups. Studies have consistently reported the HTN prevalence rate in Filipino Americans as 53 - 59.9%, which is similar to the African Americans [14-16].

Filipino Americans have also been found to have one of the highest prevalence rate of diabetes. A few studies have shown that Filipino men had the highest diabetes prevalence rate among all Asian subgroups [8,17,18]. An analysis of the California Health Interview Survey showed that the Filipino Americans had the highest BMI among all Asian American subgroups. In addition, next to Native Americans (32.4%), Filipino Americans (15.8%) had the second highest prevalence rate of diabetes [17].

Implications

Obesity and an unhealthy diet are two major risk factors for CVD, hypertension and diabetes. The prevalence rates of these diseases among Filipino Americans are concerning. Several studies have shown that even below the existing BMI cut-off point of 25 kg/m^2, the proportion of Asian people with type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease is substantial.

Since diet is a major risk factor to obesity, CVD and metabolic diseases, a culturally-tailored dietary education is important to promote healthy diet and to decrease overweight/obesity rates in this population. There is a need to redefine obesity in the Asian population, particularly in the Filipino Americans. This would lead to improvement in the prevention and earlier detection of obesity related diseases.

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