

CONFRONTING

A NATIONAL EPIDEMIC



By Julie L. Gerberding, M.D., M.P.H. '90

The United States is facing an imminent public health crisis—the epidemic of obesity. The inexorable increase in the prevalence of this preventable health condition is an unintended and deadly consequence of our prosperity and modern lifestyles. As unprecedented numbers of Americans of all ages have become either overweight or obese, this epidemic will soon overtake tobacco as the leading cause of preventable deaths in the country.



Fortunately, this national tragedy is finally receiving the attention it deserves. Much of that attention remains focused on the obvious proximate causes—overeating, poor nutrition, lack of physical exercise. Solutions aren't as easy. The science we need to inform public health policy and design effective interventions is lagging. This issue of UC Berkeley Public Health helps fill that gap. New research on risk factors and interventions, provocative discourse on size acceptance and food politics, and an overview of communication and education issues—these topics are critical to our capacity to combat obesity and its myriad consequences.

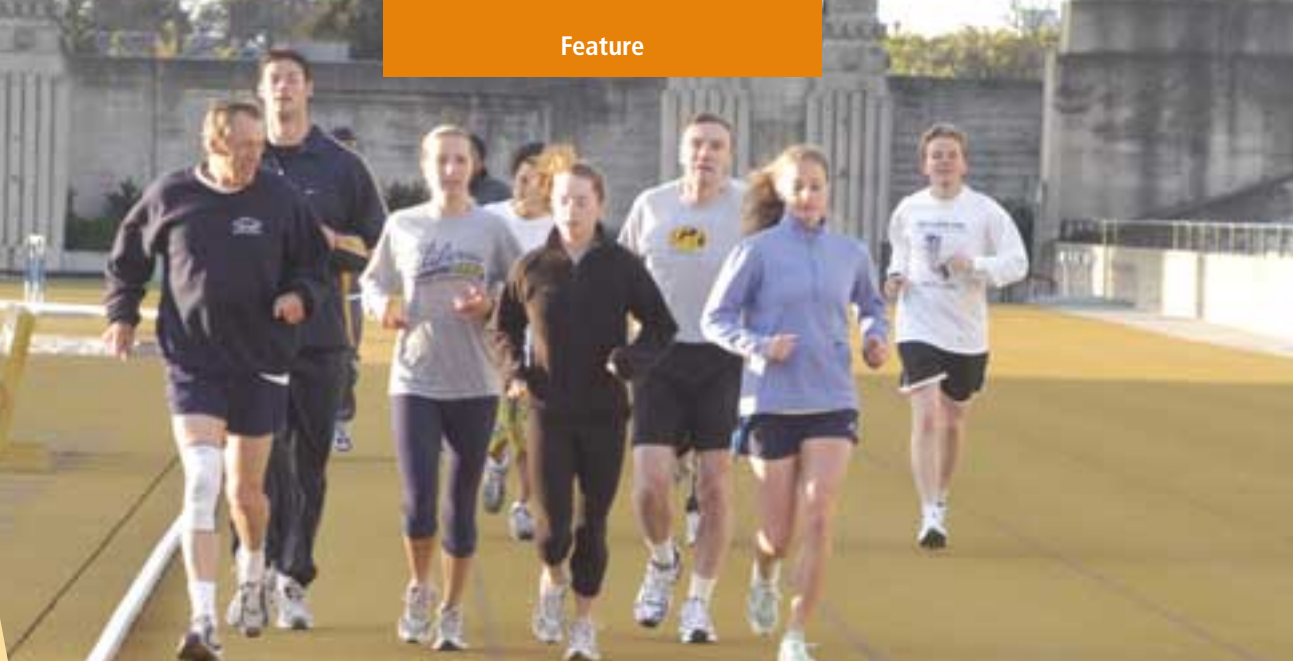
The impact of obesity on our nation's health is truly devastating. Consider these facts:

- In the past 15 years, the prevalence of obesity has increased by over 50 percent among adults and 100 percent in children and adolescents. In 2003, 23.6 percent of Americans aged 20 years and older were obese, and it is estimated that nearly two-thirds of U.S. adults are now overweight.
- Dramatic increases in the prevalence of overweight and obesity also have occurred in children and adolescents of both sexes, with approximately 15.3 percent of children aged 6 to 11 years and 15.5 percent of adolescents aged 12 to 19 years considered to be overweight.
- Overweight and obesity are associated with increased morbidity and mortality. An estimated 400,000 deaths per year may be attributed to obesity, and overweight and obesity increase the risk for coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain cancers.
- The total economic cost of obesity in the United States is up to \$117 billion per year, including more than \$60 billion in avoidable medical costs, or more than 5 percent of total annual health care expenditures. In 2003, cardiovascular disease cost the United States an estimated \$351 billion, and direct and indirect costs associated with diabetes ran to \$132 billion.
- Obesity disproportionately affects many segments of our population. For example, although overweight has increased among all children, the prevalence of overweight and obesity is significantly higher among non-Hispanic black and Mexican-American adolescents than among non-Hispanic white teens (12-19 years old). Today, a majority of non-Hispanic black women over 40 are overweight or obese.

continued on page 4



The impact of obesity on our nation's health is truly devastating.



UC President Robert C. Dynes (far left) and Dean Stephen M. Shortell (third from right) run with student leaders and members of the Cal women's track team.

Percentage of Adults Who Report Being Obese*, by State



*Body mass index ≥ 30 or about 30 pounds overweight for a 5'4" person. Based on self-reported weight and height. Source: CDC, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System.

continued from page 3

It is easy to forget that these consequences have taken years to develop. There is no magic bullet on the horizon, no easy cure. Step by step, pound by pound, Americans must change behaviors. Where science is not available, we must use common sense and good judgment. Nearly 300 years ago, poet James Thomson wrote that “Health is the vital principle of bliss, And exercise, of health.”* With this common sense advice in mind, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is rapidly advancing the “Steps to a HealthierUS” initiative, which has identified four key health-protection objectives for a healthier America: increased physical activity, responsible dietary habits, increased use of preventive health screenings, and

healthy choices concerning alcohol, tobacco, drugs and safety. The initiative’s centerpiece, the “Steps to a HealthierUS” cooperative agreement, will award \$44 million in FY 2004, and \$125 million has been requested in the president’s FY 2005 budget. Involving local communities in comprehensive intervention strategies is the foundation for the Steps initiative.

This battle of the bulge must be fought by parents in their homes, teachers in their schools, employers in their workplace, and scientists in their labs. Our best defenses are better science, better communication, better collaboration. Individuals, parents, clinicians, educators, employers, and policy makers all must

contribute, but the heroes of this war will be the dedicated public health servants, many of whom have graduated from this School of Public Health, working one step at a time to get America back on a healthy footing. This battle promises to be a long and hard one, but it’s one we have to fight. The future of our nation’s health—and increasingly the world’s health—depends on it. 🍌

— Julie L. Gerberding, M.D., M.P.H. '90, is director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and administrator of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

* The Castle of Indolence. Canto ii. Stanza 55+.