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Australia's obesity time bomb



Photo: *Jenny Evans*

By Julie Robotham
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AUSTRALIA is sitting on a time bomb of disease and early death, according to the first national survey to examine how quickly diabetes and other health threats linked to obesity and poor lifestyle are taking hold.

New figures reveal 100,000 people each year develop diabetes, which in turn doubles their chance of dying during the next five years, according to the study of more than 6000 men and women, to be released today by federal Health Minister Tony Abbott.

Although Australia's diabetes rate was known to be high, the pace of the crisis and the number of people newly affected were a shock, said one of the report's authors, Paul Zimmet, director of the Melbourne-based International Diabetes Institute.

"It is surprising. One hundred thousand new cases annually is the population of a small city ... this is the epidemic they didn't see coming," he said.

The results of the study put pressure on the Government to spend more on diabetes prevention.

Professor Zimmet said diabetes and its complications would have a huge and growing impact on the health budget, as patients might lose many years of productive life and need intensive treatment for heart disease or dialysis for kidney failure.

He called for policymakers and planners to promote opportunities for activity, saying sedentary lifestyle was to blame for many diabetes cases.

"Exercise is being engineered out of our lives," he said.

"There is clearly a personal issue here in terms of people's behaviour, (healthy) eating, exercising regularly. But there has to be an environment in the community that's conducive to doing that."

The study, funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council, revisited the health of men and women aged 30 and older, whose weight, waist circumference, blood pressure and cholesterol and

glucose levels had been measured five years earlier.

The original survey identified a diabetes rate of 7.4 per cent — much of it previously undiagnosed and the vast majority the Type 2 variety, which is linked to being overweight, inactivity and smoking.

It also identified an additional 16.3 per cent of the population with a form of abnormal glucose metabolism, or "pre-diabetes".

But the update — which comes after NSW statistics last month showed a quarter of schoolchildren are now overweight — paints an even bleaker picture of declining health.

It revealed that those with pre-diabetes were up to 20 times as likely to develop full-blown diabetes in the subsequent five years, compared with those with normal blood sugar.

In diabetes, excess sugar in the blood combines with proteins in many different body tissues, to devastating effect.

The process can directly damage the heart, kidneys and eyes, and also attacks the blood vessel walls, leading to poor circulation and amputations.

The study's co-author, Jonathan Shaw, said the results showed younger adults were gaining weight faster than those in middle age. The average man put on 13 kilograms between the ages of 25 and 50, he said, while women on average gained 14 kilograms.

A spokeswoman for Mr Abbott said \$500 million earmarked for preventive health in last week's budget would assist the early detection of diabetes and other chronic diseases.

Medicare funding would also be extended to consultations with dietitians and exercise physiologists, but individuals also needed to take responsibility for their lifestyle, she said.

"The message is that people really need to watch what they eat and make sure they exercise," the spokeswoman said.

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