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The skinny on FAT

Bigger is not always better. Besides health problems aplenty, being obese also means putting up with rude questions, sidelong stares and a whole lot of hurt

By Wong Kim Hoh

MISS Lina Cheng always gets her own seat on buses in Singapore, even during peak hours.

'Other passengers will not sit next to me, if they can help it. They probably think I take up too much space or they're worried my fat would jump off my body and infect them,' says the 31-year-old accounts clerk who packs about 100kg on a 1.63m frame.

The shunning hurts but she shrugs it off. She routinely deals with worse.

'People snigger and whisper behind my back all the time. Once, some students burst into hysterical giggles when I walked into a lift,' she says.

Mr James Ross, who tips the scales at over 200kg, knows the feeling. Each time the 39-year-old voice-over artist hops into a taxi, he is invariably asked his weight. 'Questions about a person's physical attributes are just so rude,' says the 1.88m-tall father of three children aged between seven and 11.

Miss Cheng adds: 'When you are fat, people look at you with either pity or fear.'

Indeed, in a world where fat is perceived as a major catastrophe, obesity is a magnet for problems, both medical and social.

According to guidelines by the Ministry of Health, an obese person is one whose body mass index (BMI) is 27.5 and above, and whose abdominal girth exceeds 90cm (for men), or 80cm (for women).

BMI is a measure of body fat based on one's height and weight.

The bad news is obesity is a big problem not just in Western countries like the United States and Australia - where recent studies suggest 67 per cent of men and more than half of women aged 25 are overweight and obese - but also in Singapore.

Earlier this month, Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan said obesity could well become an epidemic here. 'In terms of human cost, it is worse than Sars. It will kill many more, but in a silent way,' he said.

According to the World Health Organisation, there are about 300 million obese adults worldwide. Here in Singapore, statistics from the Health Promotion Board show 6.9 per cent of adults were obese in 2004, up from 5.1 per cent in 1992.

Similarly, 3.6 per cent of children were found to be obese last year, up from 2.8 per cent in 1994.

Corpulence brings with it a litany of health problems, from sleep apnoea to hypertension, stroke, diabetes and several types of cancer.

Says Dr Tham Kwang Wei, 36, director of Singapore General Hospital's Obesity Unit: 'The biggest risk related to obesity is diabetes. There's a 9 per cent increased risk of diabetes for every kilo increase in body weight. For someone with a BMI of 40, the risk is 93.3 times higher than for someone whose BMI is a

normal 25.'

Dr Tan Tze Jen, 35, paints an even grimmer picture.

The associate consultant at Alexandra Hospital's Department of Surgery says: 'For a 25-year-old man who is obese, there is a 22 per cent reduction in overall life expectancy, That means 12 years of life expectancy erased, not to mention acute medical problems he is likely to suffer over the years - osteoarthritis, diabetes, glaucoma, heart attacks.'

The' economics of corpulence does not just stop there. Studies in several countries suggest that obese people - among other things - have limited job options, earn less and get fewer pay raises.

Mr Shukor Kadim, who weighs about 187kg, can attest to this. The 35-year-old was fired from his job as a planning supervisor four years ago when he took no-pay leave to recuperate from lapband surgery.

Obesity: A problem not to be taken lightly

In the seven years he worked for the company, his pay inched up by only \$30. He supervised four subordinates, all of whom were better paid than he was. He's not been able to get another job since.

Meanwhile, Mr James Li, 38, feels he would have done better in his career if he were slimmer.

'When you're slim, you're more pleasant on the eye. When you're big, people think: slow and lazy,' says the civil servant who is 1.7m tall and weighs 110kg.

Mr David Leong, 38, managing director of recruitment firm People Worldwide Consulting, confirms that obese people get the short end of the stick in the working world.

For example, he says it is common for health-care and marketing companies to hire applicants with healthy BMIs. He adds: 'You also rarely see obese people in interfacing jobs such as sales and marketing because appearance counts.'

'Hospitals, for instance, are not likely to recruit nurses who do not look healthy.'

Not surprisingly, many obese people have self-image and other psychological problems, with the premium placed on looks and slimness. Two recent studies show overweight people tend to have more psychological issues.

A study published in the International Journal Of Paediatric Obesity in 2005 suggested some overweight children have lower self-esteem, higher body dissatisfaction and are more depressed.

Likewise, a study in the International Journal Of Obesity last year found that overweight and obese women are at risk of developing sustained depressive mood.

Dr Chan Keen Loong, a psychiatrist at Alexandra Hospital, says obesity can also result in among other things - 'emotional distress, loneliness, poor self-esteem, eating disorders and binge eating'.

He has a 26-year-old patient who is miserable and stressed working as a salesman. However, he dares not quit for fear he won't be able to find another job. He copes by bingeing, and is so depressed, he seldom ventures out of his home after work.

The US Rudd Centre for Food Policy and Obesity in the US found that nearly 80 per cent of people stigmatised because of their weight reported eating more to cope with the bias. In more serious cases, the feelings of rejection and shame are so strong, obese people attempt self-harm and even suicide, Dr Chan adds.

He recounts the case of a 19-year-old girl who once cut her wrists because her mother often compared her to her older, slimmer and prettier sister.

Of course, not all obese people are weighed down by self-image and other psychological issues.

Dr Chan says there are many examples of obese people who are well adjusted, successful and happily married. A well-known example is comedian Moses Lim.

Another is Ms Sharmilah Begum, 33, who founded a support group for plus-size women called BIG (Big Is Gorgeous) which boasts more than 200 members.

She runs a plus-size boutique and dance school, and conducts makeover courses for big women in a shophouse behind Ang Mo Kio Hub.

'If you put in a little effort, everything can be done. Beauty can be created. You don't have to feel down just because you're big. You can still have fun and still look beautiful and feel appreciated,' says the 80kg, 1.58m-tall social entrepreneur who is married to an Indonesian-Chinese former model.

The question then arises: With so much stigma attached to excess weight, why is obesity more widespread here?

SGH's Dr Tham says: 'It has a lot to do with lifestyle, not just in Singapore but worldwide. Many of us lead an obesogenic lifestyle, one which involves less physical activity, and consumption of food which is processed and generally higher in fat and calories.'

Alexandra Hospital's Dr Tan believes many people struggle with weight issues because of a lack of knowledge and support. 'We are constantly bombarded with advertisements of slimming programmes. But what's safe and effective and what's not? What gives long-term and sustainable benefits? People need to know that.'

Many hospitals - such as Alexandra and Raffles - now offer comprehensive weight-loss programmes and services, from detailed exercise and diet advice to surgical procedures such as lapband and gastric bypass surgery.

The latest is SGH's The Life Centre, which aims to tackle obesity not as a disease but a lifestyle issue. Opened in October last year, it houses, under one roof, the services of an endocrinologist, a dietitian, a physical trainer and even a psychologist.

Dr Tham says: 'Often, the biggest hurdle to weight management is recognising and changing one's lifestyle. We try to help people identify emotional or medical triggers which make them overeat, and look into factors like eating patterns, stress levels and lack of sleep.'

The endocrinologist knows what she's talking about. Four years ago, her weight was nearly 80kg and her BMI was over 28.

Through proper nutrition and exercise, she has brought her weight down to 49kg and her BMI to about 20.

She says: 'We give them the right nutrition and exercise advice, offer options and help them build regularity. Lifestyle is all about routine and room for flexibility.'

Dr Tan puts things into perspective.

'Society has placed a specific template on what is an acceptable size or shape. But we are not looking for that. As health professionals, we are looking for overall health and fitness, and combating high blood pressure, glaucoma and cancers.'

He adds: 'The final common denominator is, with improved weight and fitness, an obese person can avoid these problems. Now, this is what excites us.'

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