So Is Obesity Bad for You or Not?

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - New statistics published this week questioned the U.S. government's assertion that obesity causes nearly as many deaths as smoking in a finding certain to confuse many.

The report, published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, directly contradicted the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) message that obesity was quickly catching up to heart disease as a cause of death in the United States.

The CDC said smoking kills 435,000 Americans a year and said obesity and overweight killed close to 400,000. This number was revised downward later.

But the latest report, from a unit of the CDC, cuts the number by 75 percent.

Katherine Flegal of the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), part of the CDC, says in a report issued Tuesday that her review of two large government surveys showed that obesity caused 112,000 excess deaths in 2000.

"Here is a group of people who are obese. If these people had all been of normal weight, how many deaths would be expected in this group and how many deaths did we actually have," she said in a telephone interview.

So what does it mean? Is it okay to be fat?

"Yeah," said Tim Church of the Dallas-based Cooper Institute, which advocates plenty of exercise.

"What we have shown a thousand times is it is about behavior; it is not about the scale. We as Americans are so hung up on what the scale says. We have shown that it is more important to be fit than it is to be a normal weight."

The American Heart Association's Dr. Bob Eckel disagreed.

"I hope people aren't jumping to that conclusion," Eckel said in a telephone interview.

"We are getting heavier, younger, and people don't die of obesity in five to 10 years. I think the epidemic of obesity is not being assessed adequately."

"I am sure this is going to create confusion," agreed Dr. William Cochran, a pediatric gastroenterologist and nutritionist for Pennsylvania's Geisinger Health System.

"I think like most things it's a mixed bag and the truth is not always black and white. But there is positively, absolutely undeniably no doubt that being obese is not good for you."

Eckel and Cochran agreed that better drugs are improving the health of all Americans, especially overweight ones.

"There is no question about that," Eckel said. "Drugs people take to reduce blood pressure, control diabetes and lower cholesterol may be responsible for the reduction of death."

A second CDC study in this week's issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association tends to support this idea. It found many fewer people smoked, had high cholesterol levels, or high blood pressure, particularly overweight and obese adults, compared to 40 years ago.

And Church agreed that most Americans do not meet the profile of being overweight yet fit.

"No, the average American is not fit," he said. "That is the problem -- we are an extremely sedentary country. We have two epidemics in this country -- one is obesity and one is physical inactivity."

Cochran noted the current study points to adults, most of whom only became overweight as adults. But 16 percent of U.S. children are overweight, and other studies have predicted they may die at younger ages than their parents will.

"We are seeing kids with insulin resistance, kids with what used to be called adult onset diabetes. I see kids that can't breathe at nighttime. So there is no doubt, being obese is not healthy," Cochran said.