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# US health industry meets as obesity crisis looms

Americans, fatter and lazier than they have ever been, can reduce the risk of developing a debilitating illness simply by dropping a few pounds, occasionally breaking a sweat and kicking smokes.

Though 125 million Americans, close to half the country's population, suffer from some preventable chronic condition, many of those could be avoided by simple changes in behaviour, the American Public Health Association (APHA) said, which opens its annual meeting in San Francisco on Sunday.

Helping people head off those health problems, which account for 70 per cent of all deaths in the country and nearly 75 per cent of healthcare costs, will be the focus of the four-day meeting, which features a keynote address from David Heymann of the World Health Organisation (WHO).

About 12,000 healthcare professionals are expected to attend the conference, which will include hundreds of seminars on topics ranging from public health policy to the benefits of chiropractic care.

Although infectious diseases like West Nile Virus and SARS [Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome] have captured headlines, experts say the bulk of the discussion will centre on obesity and tobacco.

Even as Americans steadily give up smokes, they are getting fatter, raising the risk of diabetes, heart disease and some cancers.

"The prevalence of massive obesity has exploded in this country," Richard Atkinson said, president of the American Obesity Association (AOA).

"The problem has gotten great enough and the consequences big enough that they can't be ignored".

Until recently considered a cosmetic issue, obesity has become one of the nation's leading killers.

Nearly 60 million Americans now meet the medical definition of obesity and more than 300,000 deaths annually are directly linked to obesity, the AOA said.

About \$US100 billion is spent annually treating obesity.

The cost of treating diabetes, a lack of insulin often caused by obesity, falls dramatically if patients shed excess weight.

That is because the drugs diabetics take often cause other health problems that require still more drugs - get rid of one and you get rid of the other.

"There's a huge drop in costs and it comes with a concomitant rise in well-being," California Pharmacists Association chief executive officer Carlo Michelotti said, who estimates expenses can fall to \$US30 a month from \$US300.

Though Americans are now smoking less - about a quarter of the population is still puffing away, cancer remains one of the country's most deadly diseases.

An estimated 1.3 million new cancer cases are expected to be diagnosed in 2003, the American Cancer Society (ACS) said.

Almost 600,000 cancer-related deaths are forecast for the same period.

ACS epidemiological research head Michael Thun said many of those are avoidable.

"If we could apply what we know now, we could prevent half of all cancer deaths - it's preventable," he said.

In addition to kicking the habit and adopting a lighter diet, he says Americans should be regularly screened for the most prevalent forms of cancer.

Caught early on, colon, breast, skin and cervical cancer can all be cured, he says.

The meeting opens the day before former bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger, possibly the world's most fitness-conscious politician, is scheduled to be sworn-in as governor of California.

Health professionals hope he can help a nation of Homer Simpson's put down the donuts and pick up the barbells.

"He's certainly getting a lot of attention," AOA spokesman Dr Atkinson said.

"He could play a real role in bringing awareness to the issue."

-- **Reuters**