

Script – Print - The Skinny on Obesity and Cancer

New study shows millennials at increased risk

The health risks are numerous for people who are overweight. Primary concerns have always been heart disease and diabetes. In some cases, cancer too can be directly correlated to obesity.

Now, a new study by the American Cancer Society suggests cancers, thought to be driven at least in part by excess weight, are on the rise among people under age 50 - particularly millennials - considered to be between ages 20 and 37.

The news comes as no surprise to OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center oncologist Dr. Ajaz Khan,

"There's been a significant rise in young patients having colorectal cancer," says Dr. Ajaz Khan, Oncologist with OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center. "And also upper GI malignancies, such as esophagus or gastro cancer. We've noticed a continual rise in that over the last ten years."

Dr. Khan says while it's not entirely clear as to the risk factors causing the cancer spike, he suspects one is increased carcinogens from diet and food intake.

The study reports the rates of colorectal, endometrial, pancreatic and gallbladder cancers in millennials were about double the rates seen in people born in the 1950's. That has Dr. Khan believing screenings - particularly for colon cancer, which is now advised only for persons over 40, should be expanded.

"What about those patients under 40 that don't have a family history", asks Dr. Ajaz Khan, Oncologist with OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center. "We're not screening them. And do we need to start screening them? Is this data telling us that we need to move in that direction? That's still up for debate. But we'll have to see where the numbers are, exactly, moving forward."

Dr. Khan also is worried that, if we're seeing increased obesity-related cancers among millennials, what about future generations? He believes families need to work more closely with their primary care physicians, incorporate diet and exercise into their lifestyles and monitor their body mass index (BMI).

He also advises genetic testing.

"When we see our patients from the cancer perspective, we're trying to steer them toward getting genetic counseling and genetic evaluations done," says Dr. Ajaz Khan, Oncologist with OSF HealthCare Saint Anthony Medical Center. "Not just for themselves, but also for their family. So, if there's a family member that's been diagnosed with cancer, they need to get genetic screening done."

Additionally, Dr. Khan says a re-assessment of present screening techniques may be needed to determine if they should be more comprehensive.