

## **Obesity and Back Pain**

Obesity is an extremely common condition in the U.S. and worldwide. Approximately 65% of persons living in the U.S. are now considered overweight (Body Mass Index or BMI > 25), 30% of our citizens are obese (BMI > 30), and nearly 5% are morbidly obese (BMI >40). Over the past decade the prevalence of obesity in the U.S. has risen by 50%, with the greatest increase in morbid or severe obesity.

Obesity is known to increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes, some forms of cancer, and possibly even premature death. Obesity is also known to contribute to a variety of musculoskeletal problems including osteoarthritis of weightbearing (knee) and non-weightbearing joints.

With all this information on the prevalence of obesity and associated diseases, one might deduce that obesity can be a significant source of back pain or degenerative disc disease. It is quite common for doctors to advise their patients to lose weight, either for the purpose of reducing back pain or to prevent it. However, there is surprisingly little scientific evidence to suggest that obesity is a causative factor in the generation of back pain. Furthermore, there are no controlled studies that demonstrate that weight loss relieves back pain or reduces its recurrence. Finally there is little evidence showing that maintenance of normal weight prevents back pain.

It is intuitive that obesity can be associated with back pain, but there is no scientific evidence to support this claim. Until there is conclusive evidence from a controlled study that demonstrates a cause-and-effect relationship between obesity and back pain, the only recommendation that can reasonably be made for obese patients at present is to lose weight to avoid the serious medical conditions that are noted above.