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Poor Diet Sinks U.S. in Health Rankings

Researchers of a study that looked at U.S. health over 20 years were surprised to find diet played a dominant role in burden-of-disease risk, surpassing tobacco use.

By Andréa Maria Cecil

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Americans are dying younger and living their later years with more diseases than citizens of poorer countries that spend far less than the U.S. on health care, according to a new study.

The most surprising finding, the researchers said, was that the No. 1 risk factor contributing to the burden of disease is the simplest of things: diet.

“That was very powerful for us—something we did not expect,” Ali Mokdad told the *Journal*.

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According to Dr. Mike Ray (left), it's more important to focus on improving health now rather than treating disease later.

He added: "That's the biggest thing: I think maybe some of this is because one of the biggest issues we need to address in medicine is there's so much of a focus on treating sickness as opposed to actively promoting health."

They sound the same but require a different mindset, Ray explained.

He pointed to the study's closing sentence: "In many cases, the best investments for improving population health would likely be public health programs and multisectoral action to address risks such as physical inactivity, diet, ambient particulate pollution, and alcohol and tobacco consumption."

"That's bold," Ray said.

The next step, he continued, is to widely distribute the study.

"As much as possible, get this information out there to as many people and health care providers as possible and

involve them in these kind of efforts," Ray said. "There's all this talk about health-care reform in this country right now, and part of that needs to be a shift in emphasis to focusing on things that lead to health instead of desperately trying to extend unhealthy life once sickness has taken hold. And that needs to be a shared responsibility between people, patients and health-care providers."

Mokdad echoed those sentiments, saying healthier lives are made via simple lifestyle choices.

"It's very true. It's all about how we carry out our life and find a balance of what we eat and consume and physical activity," he said. "A balanced life is very important."



About the Author

Andréa Maria Cecil is a CrossFit Journal staff writer and editor.