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## Maintaining healthy weight - the key to avoiding chronic disease

Maintaining a healthy weight has emerged as the most important factor for Australian women in avoiding chronic diseases such as vascular disease, diabetes and asthma, according to researchers from two Australian universities.

The findings come from a report released today by the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health based at the University of Newcastle and The University of Queensland and funded by the Australian Government's Department of Health and Ageing. The study - also known as Women's Health Australia - is the largest of its kind ever conducted in Australia.

Professor Julie Byles from the University of Newcastle's Priority Research Centre for Gender, Health and Ageing, said the report comprehensively assessed the health of over 30,000 Australian women in three age groups over a ten year period from 1996 to 2006.

"The report found that being overweight or obese was more consistently associated with chronic illness than smoking, alcohol use, or education," said Professor Byles.

Professor Annette Dobson from UQ's School of Population Health said the findings show that across all age groups, being overweight or obese was consistently linked to heart disease, hypertension, osteoporosis, diabetes, asthma and arthritis.

"In light of the increasing weight of women across all age groups, weight gain clearly poses a major threat to the health of Australian women," said Professor Dobson.

Further findings indicated that less than two in five younger women taking part in the study ate two or more pieces of fruit per day, the amount recommended by the National 'Go for 2&5' campaign. In contrast, more than half of the women in the mid-age category ate the recommended amount.

Although the study revealed very few differences in health across urban, rural and remote areas there was a much higher prevalence of diabetes in young women living in small rural centres.

Professors Byles and Dobson said other results from the study revealed that smoking, as expected, is related to an increased risk of chronic disease. However the proportion of women smoking in the younger age group is decreasing over time. In addition, in all age groups, being physically active provided some protection from chronic disease.

The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health is designed to run for twenty years and has now completed its first decade.

**For interviews contact Professor Julie Byles, Priority Research Centre for Gender, Health and Ageing at the University of Newcastle on 02 4923 6643 or Professor Annette Dobson, School of Population Health at The University of Queensland on 07 3365 5346.**