



## Australia: the world's fattest nation

### A public health crisis

Australia is now the fattest nation in the world, with more than 9 million adults rated as obese or overweight. (Stewart et al, 2008)

It is predicted that this will lead to 123,000 premature deaths over the next two decades and that an extra 700,000 people will be admitted to hospital for heart attacks, strokes and blood clots caused by excess weight. The costs will exceed AUD 6 billion.

4 million Australians – 26% of the adult population – are now obese and a further 5 million overweight. But among the middle-aged population, who are most at risk of premature death, 72% of men and 58% of women are obese or overweight.

The grim picture is blamed on a boom in fast food and a decline in physical activity. It is said to be a public health crisis with no parallel.

### Decline in cycling

One type of physical activity that has declined markedly in Australia over the past 20 years has been cycling, especially the regular use of a bike for everyday journeys that has the most benefit for health. Regular cycle use has been shown to be associated with a significantly lower risk of heart disease, reduced risk of stroke, diabetes and most of the other causes of premature death that now face Australians (Cavill and Davis, 2007). Cycling is an effective means of weight control and leads to a reduction in body fat. In general, people who cycle regularly live longer than those who do not (Andersen, Schnohr, Schroll and Hein, 2000). Dr Bernard Pearn-Rowe, a past president of the Australian Medical Association, recommends cycling to most of his patients. "It is good for the cardiovascular system, the respiratory system and it doesn't stress the joints or the back", he has said (WAust, 2003).

It is rare for people whose lifestyle includes cycling to become obese. Just 15 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity a day reduces the odds of obesity in 12 year old boys by 50% and in girls by 40% (Ness et al, 2007).

### Helmet laws and obesity

Australia's cycle helmet laws are the principal reasons for the dramatic falls in cycling since the early 1990s, leading to reductions in cycle use of 30% or more almost overnight. It has been suggested that compulsion to wear a bicycle helmet is detrimental to public health in Australia (Curnow, 2008; Rissel, 2003). **Helmet laws are very likely to have been a key contributor to Australians' decline in physical activity that has led to the obesity epidemic.**

This is especially so for children. The number of overweight and obese children in Western Australia increased from 9% of boys and 10.6% of girls in 1985 to 21.7% of boys and 27.8% of girls in 2003 (WA). In the 5 years from 1992 when the state helmet law was enforced, more than half of Western Australia's children stopped cycling to school (Bikewest, 1996).

Surprisingly, the Baker Research Institute report for the Australian Government (Stewart et al, 2008) makes no reference at all to cycling or the likely connection between its decline and obesity. In tackling Australia's worst public health crisis, it is essential that all possible causes be investigated and addressed.

### An international perspective

The country that is runner-up to the title of 'world's fattest nation' is the USA, where 25% of adults are obese. The



USA has also been very active in persuading people that cycling is too dangerous without a helmet. Indeed, it is generally the case in western countries that cycle use is inversely associated with the degree to which cycle helmets are promoted (BHRF, 1079).

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The Bicycle Helmet Research Foundation (BHRF), an incorporated body with an international membership, exists to undertake, encourage and spread the scientific study of the use of bicycle helmets. Also to consider the effect of the promotion and use of helmets on the perception of cycling in terms of risk and the achievement of wider public health and societal goals.

BHRF strives to provide a resource of best-available factual information to assist the understanding of a complex subject, and one where some of the reasoning may conflict with received opinion. In particular BHRF seeks to provide access to a wider range of information than is commonly made available by those that take a strong helmet promotion stance. It is hoped that this will assist informed judgements about the pros and cons of cycle helmets.

For more information, please visit [www.cyclehelmets.org](http://www.cyclehelmets.org).

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