

PROJECT FACT SHEET

Obesity — is it all in our head?

Investigator: Michael Wilkinson
Professor
Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology
Dalhousie University

Many of us have more body fat than we would like, but few of us think about it in terms of where it is stored. That would be in our adipose tissue, a loose connective tissue directly under the skin and surrounding many of our major organs. However, adipose tissue does more than store fat; it also produces hormones that regulate appetite and body weight by targeting the brain.

Michael Wilkinson, Professor, Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Dalhousie University leads a group of researchers that discovered important hormones produced by adipose tissue are also created by the brain and pituitary gland. In a recent study, supported by the NSHRF, the group went on to explore what effect the hormones produced in the brain have on appetite and body weight compared to those produced in adipose tissue.

“The study showed these brain hormones do play a role in regulating appetite and body weight, and that mixed signals from the brain and from the adipose tissue may lead to significant weight gain and obesity,” said Dr. Wilkinson.

Obesity increases an individual’s risks for certain conditions and shortens life-spans. Childhood obesity is a particularly critical issue for Nova Scotians. For the first time in our history the country’s younger generations are expected to live shorter lives than their parents because of obesity.

“Obesity is more than a psychological disease,” notes Dr. Wilkinson, “it has a significant genetic component. Our hope is that by learning to control this hormone production we will be able to treat obesity in an entirely new way.”

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Contact information:
Michael Wilkinson
Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology
Phone: (902) 470.7196
Michael.Wilkinson@Dal.Ca