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Exercise the power to get fit

Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee had a weight problem. That was more than 10 months and 100 pounds ago.

But America still has a weight problem -- and it's growing. As a result, our nation also has a growing health problem. A recently released federal study confirmed that unpleasant news by documenting an increase of 33 percent -- from 300,000 to 400,000 -- in the number of deaths related to "poor diet and physical inactivity" from 1990-2000.

Unless that troubling trend is halted, obesity-related deaths appear likely to overtake tobacco-related deaths as our nation's leading killer. U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson aptly assessed this widening menace:

"The increase in America's waistlines is shrinking our lifelines. We've just gotten too darn fat, ladies and gentlemen, and we are going to do something about it."

Part of that "something" is a national advertising campaign, from the Food and Drug Administration, urging Americans to eat less and exercise more. Secretary Thompson also hailed the food and restaurant industry's willingness to provide healthier menus. Yet while federal advocacy of healthier lifestyles is welcome, ultimately, individuals, not government, will determine how much fatter -- or fitter -- we get.

Gov. Huckabee demonstrated that power of individual choice in his vast weight loss. He cited his commitments to regular exercise and moderate food consumption as the key factors in his transformation. And South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford has set a healthy example of his own with a cross-state bike trip that started Saturday in the Upstate.

But only when enough Americans now eating too much and exercising too little decide to correct those self-destructive habits, and follow through on those choices, will the rising health-care costs -- and the rising death toll -- inflicted by rising obesity recede.

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