Diet Dogma Misguided, Study Reveals
Review of Data Uncovers 5 Medical Myths

[February 28, 2011] Advising obese and overweight patients to lose weight does more harm than good, according to a recent study in Nutrition Journal, an online scientific publication. Just weeks after publication, the article ranks as one of the publication’s most “highly accessed” and has generated a storm of controversy among health professionals.

Rather than improving patient well-being, their results show, weight-loss advice more often leads to weight gain, feelings of failure, and diminished health status. The authors advise health professionals to set aside weight as a marker and instead help people improve health behaviors. “Many medical and policy measures are misdirected, costly and damaging,” explained Bacon. “Our data show that body weight is a poor target for public health interventions.”

Five Medical Myths
The Bacon-Aphramor study rebuts five major myths widely accepted by medical and nutrition practitioners, assumptions like:

- Weight loss prolongs life. In fact, “overweight” people have lower mortality rates than thin ones, according to the Centers for Disease Control and others.
- Anyone can lose weight and keep it off through diet and exercise. In fact, a National Institutes of Health panel and others found almost all “lost” weight returns within five years.
- Weight loss is a practical and positive goal. In fact, weight loss efforts more often lead to weight cycling than slimming, which is implicated in risk for diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other concerns.
- Weight loss is the only way overweight and obese people can improve their health. In fact, it is well-proven that changing health behaviors can improve health (even when weight is gained). And,
- Obesity places an economic burden on society. In fact, using Body Mass Index – rather than actual health conditions – as a proxy for health problems focuses wasteful medical treatment on healthy fat people, while overlooking at-risk thin people – and also results in damaging weight stigmatization and bias.

“Health professionals may mean well when they suggest people lose weight, but our analysis indicates that the ‘facts’ they’re acting on come through a flawed filter,” explains Bacon. “Without the common assumption that fat is harmful,” said Bacon, “the data show that fat has been exaggerated as a risk for disease or decreased longevity” with costly results.

Using Evidence-Based Approaches
“For decades, the United States' public health establishment and a private weight loss industry of $58.6 billion a year have focused on health improvement through weight loss,” Bacon notes. With little to show for all these billions, Bacon and Aphramor urge
the health care community to adopt “a more ethical, evidence-based approach toward public health nutrition” – one that encourages individuals to concentrate on developing healthy habits rather than weight management.

Evidence shows that changing health behaviors can sustainably improve blood pressure, blood lipids, self-esteem, body image, and other indicators of health and well-being independent of any weight change and without the negative aspects of the diet-and-diet-again approach. While weight loss may result, the goal is self-care rather than weight loss, they say. This weight-neutral practice has become known as Health at Every Size.

Bacon is the author of the 2010 book, “Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight,” based on previously published research. She is also the founder of Health at Every Size Community Resources, available online.

Financial support for this study was provided through a West Midlands Nurses, Midwives and Allied Health Professions research training award to Aphramor. Bacon and Aphramor are both Health at Every Size practitioners and sometimes receive financial compensation for writing and speaking on this topic.

Media contact:

- Linda Bacon, PhD, (510) 542-7317 linda@lindabacon.org

###