

AUSTRALIA could see the number of cancer cases double within 20 years if we don't change our poor lifestyle habits, a world expert has warned.

Professor Graham Colditz warns that obesity and excess weight alone costs Australia \$21 billion a year based on research published in a recent issue of the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

Professor Colditz, an Australian who has taught at Harvard and is based at the University of Washington Medical School, says more than 14 percent of Australian cancer deaths in men and more than 20 percent in women – 6500 cancer deaths a year – were due to excess weight and obesity.

“These cancer deaths could be avoided if we did not gain weight through our adult years,” Professor Colditz said.

In addition to weight and obesity other risk factors included poor diet, too little exercise, smoking and excessive drinking.

He said the same collection of risk factors coupled with Australia's aging population would see the number of other diseases and medical conditions spike too such as diabetes, heart disease and stroke if something is not done.

On the plus side, Professor Colditz said more than 50 percent of cancers were preventable and with sustained changes in lifestyle that figure could increase.

Professor Colditz has called for a holistic approach to the prevention of cancer and other diseases to flow through what people do at home, the way we work, our schools and adult education institutions, community groups, urban planning and design and the delivery of health services.

He said diet and exercise were not only crucial to cancer prevention but also to supporting treatment for cancer patients so an example of a more holistic approach would be to get oncologists to talk about these issues when treating patients.

“An oncologist is focused on the patient's cancer but perhaps they need to look past the cancer to the whole person and discuss diet and exercise,” he said.

“Physical fitness and weight control helps reduce the reoccurrence of cancer and improve and extend survival rates too.”

Women could be told about the impact of diet and exercise when going for cancer screening such as mammograms while general practitioners should build lifestyle questions and advice into nearly every patient conversation.

Employers could do their bit by providing access to exercise during work hours even if that was just secure parking for cyclists or an office shower,

demanding healthy snacks and drinks for vending machines and serving healthy food and drink options at meetings.

Parent groups were already addressing access to health food in schools but more effort needed to be made.

Urban design also plays a role in creating opportunities for people to build more walking, cycling and even weight bearing exercise by carrying shopping into their daily lives.

Professor Colditz said solid gains had already been made in banning smoking from workplaces, hospitality venues, transport and many public places but it was time for more focus to be placed on healthy eating and exercise.