

Forks vs Feet: Which Is More Critical to Obesity Prevention and Treatment?



On Tuesday June 6th, the Canadian Obesity Network Toronto Chapter hosted “Fork vs Feet”, a debate between Dr. Yoni Freedhoff and Dr. Robert Ross, two of Canada’s top experts on weight management. The experts provided their arguments for supporting diet or exercise as the primary tool in weight management. The event attracted over 125 individuals to Mount Sinai Hospital, including health care practitioners, policymakers, researchers, obesity stakeholders, media and the general public, to observe a riveting debate that showcased the latest clinical research in obesity management for each platform.

Dr. Ross argued in support of exercise being most effective for obesity management. This is consistent with his extensive research on the relationship between exercise, body fat distribution and metabolic changes at Queens University where he serves as an Associate Professor. Dr. Ross touts the benefits of exercise on preventing conditions commonly associated with excess weight such as insulin resistance and central fat deposition. He argues that “healthcare can do better” in managing obesity by steering away from traditional measurement tools like weight and Body Mass Index (BMI), and rather focus on cardio-respiratory fitness and waist circumference for monitoring one’s health status.

Dr. Freedhoff is notorious for being Canada’s “Nutrition Watchdog” and is a supporter of dietary change for weight management. He is a family physician and founder of Ottawa’s Bariatric Medical Institute, author of bestseller “The Diet Fix”, and engages the public weekly with his blog “Weighty Matters”. He argues that exercise alone is insufficient to produce weight loss comparable to dietary change.



According to Dr. Freedhoff, using Dr. Ross’s practice of exercise for weight management and ignoring the scale is not realistic or rewarding for patients who want to lose weight. However, he points out that exercise has extraordinary benefits for health beyond weight management, and fears that its branding as a weight loss therapy may lead people to stop exercising when it doesn’t produce desired weight loss outcomes, thus losing the other associated health benefits of exercise.

Despite their differences, the two experts agree that weight and BMI are not reliable indicators for determining risks to someone’s health. They believe that patients should focus less on the scale and more on achieving a functional status that allows them to lead full lives. They also agree that to tackle obesity comprehensively, responsibility for weight loss can’t be left entirely on patients’ backs. They argue that social policy changes are required to support individuals in eating healthy food, managing their weight and improving their overall health.



“Show of hand” polls before and after the debate revealed unsurprisingly that votes for exercise being the best determinant for weight management shifted from a low of 4.8% to 6.4% of the audience. Summing it up, Dr. Freedhoff said “Exercise gives more health improvements than any drug. But to achieve sustained weight loss, diet changes have more impact than exercise. And applied together, exercise and dietary changes are the best formula for health improvements and weight loss.”

Video footage online will be provided upon availability.