

TOM DAVIS, VIRGINIA,  
CHAIRMAN

DAN BURTON, INDIANA  
CHRISTOPHER SHAYS, CONNECTICUT  
ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN, FLORIDA  
JOHN M. McHUGH, NEW YORK  
JOHN L. MICA, FLORIDA  
MARK E. SOUDER, INDIANA  
STEVEN C. LATOURETTE, OHIO  
DOUG OSE, CALIFORNIA  
RON LEWIS, KENTUCKY  
JO ANN DAVIS, VIRGINIA  
TODD RUSSELL PLATTS, PENNSYLVANIA  
CHRIS CANNON, UTAH  
ADAM H. PUTNAM, FLORIDA  
EDWARD L. SCHROCK, VIRGINIA  
JOHN J. DUNCAN, JR., TENNESSEE  
NATHAN DEAL, GEORGIA  
CANDICE MILLER, MICHIGAN  
TIM MURPHY, PENNSYLVANIA  
MICHAEL R. TURNER, OHIO  
JOHN R. CARTER, TEXAS  
MARSHA BLACKBURN, TENNESSEE  
PATRICK J. TIBERI, OHIO  
KATHERINE HARRIS, FLORIDA

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTH CONGRESS

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM

2157 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6143

MAJORITY (202) 225-5074  
FACSIMILE (202) 225-3974  
MINORITY (202) 225-5051  
TTY (202) 225-6852

[www.house.gov/reform](http://www.house.gov/reform)

June 21, 2004

HENRY A. WAXMAN, CALIFORNIA,  
RANKING MINORITY MEMBER

TOM LANTOS, CALIFORNIA  
MAJOR R. OWENS, NEW YORK  
EDOLPHUS TOWNS, NEW YORK  
PAUL E. KANJORSKI, PENNSYLVANIA  
CAROLYN B. MALONEY, NEW YORK  
ELIJAH E. CUMMINGS, MARYLAND  
DENNIS J. KUCINICH, OHIO  
DANNY K. DAVIS, ILLINOIS  
JOHN F. TIERNEY, MASSACHUSETTS  
WM. LACY CLAY, MISSOURI  
DIANE E. WATSON, CALIFORNIA  
STEPHEN F. LYNCH, MASSACHUSETTS  
CHRIS VAN HOLLEN, MARYLAND  
LINDA T. SANCHEZ, CALIFORNIA  
C.A. DUTCH RUPPERSBERGER,  
MARYLAND  
ELEANOR HOLMES NORTON,  
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA  
JIM COOPER, TENNESSEE

BERNARD SANDERS, VERMONT,  
INDEPENDENT

The Honorable David M. Walker  
Comptroller General  
U.S. General Accounting Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Walker:

Researchers from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that poor diet and physical inactivity caused 400,000 deaths in the United States in the year 2000, and tobacco caused 435,000 deaths. The researchers concluded that “poor diet and physical inactivity may soon overtake tobacco as the leading cause of death.”<sup>1</sup>

Because the scope of the obesity problem has major implications for research and policy, it is critically important that the CDC’s estimates are based upon the best available science. According to a May 7 article in *Science*, some scientists have raised concerns about the report’s methodology. These concerns appear to stem from differences in the way that the obesity estimate and the tobacco estimate were calculated. *Science* also reported that there were “very contentious” internal agency discussions of this analysis.<sup>2</sup>

Last year, at the request of Rep. Richard Burr, the General Accounting Office reviewed CDC’s estimate of the number of Americans who die from tobacco-related causes each year. GAO found that the agency used acceptable methodology and its results were reasonable.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>Ali H. Mokdad, et al., *Actual Causes of Death, 2000*, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 1238–1245 (Mar. 10, 2004).

<sup>2</sup>Eliot Marshall, *Public Enemy Number One; Tobacco or Obesity?*, *Science*, 804 (May 7, 2004).

<sup>3</sup>General Accounting Office, *CDC’s 2002 Report on the Health Consequences of Smoking* (July 17, 2003).

The Honorable David M. Walker  
June 21, 2004  
Page 2

I request that GAO perform a similar analysis of CDC's estimate of mortality from obesity. Specifically, I request that GAO assess:

- The methodology of the CDC report, including concerns raised by internal and external scientists;
- The process of internal review of the report at CDC; and
- The broader question of how to develop a consistent methodology for comparing preventable causes of death.

GAO can play an important role in addressing concerns in the scientific community about the findings of this important paper.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Henry A. Waxman". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Henry A. Waxman  
Ranking Minority Member