By Wendy Demark-Wahnefried, Ph.D., R.D.

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Alabama has done it again. For the second year in a row, our state has been rated the second fattest in the nation, according to the annual report compiled by the Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. In the report, entitled “F as in Fat: How Obesity Threatens America's Future 2010,” the underbelly of southern states that extend from Oklahoma to West Virginia tip the scales as the fattest, with Mississippi leading the way, but followed closely by Alabama and Tennessee. Researchers at the UAB Comprehensive Cancer Center, however, are working hard to determine what this means for cancer, as well as surviving the disease once it is diagnosed.

Unexplained weight loss and wasting have long been known as a symptom of cancer; however, that usually happens in the very final stages of disease and not in the early stages when it begins to gain a foothold on the body. Like an aggressive hunter, cancer tends to stalk the plumpest and largest victims. A decade ago, researchers started to make the link between obesity and cancers of the endometrium, kidney, upper stomach, colon, and for breast cancer that occurs after menopause. But now as early detection methods improve, other cancers are joining the list, such as gallbladder and ovarian cancers. For others, such as prostate cancer, the threat of obesity seems to lie not in overall risk, but as a factor which separates the men who are likely to have more aggressive forms of disease from those most likely to overcome their diagnosis. Obese men are at a clear disadvantage.

Several investigators at UAB are studying the role that obesity and energy balance play in cancer. These studies range from epidemiologic studies that track obesity rates in various populations and then link them to the risks of developing and dying from cancer, to studies in animal models that target specific biochemical mechanisms, to studies in humans that try to tackle the best ways to intervene in people at high risk.

About Wendy Demark-Wahnefried Ph.D, R.D. and her research

Fighting cancer is a family affair: The Jill family participated in the DAMES Against Breast Cancer Trial. Together, mother and daughter lost 33 pounds. With more frequent walks, even "Rocky" the dog lost 11 pounds.