

**YOUNGSTOWN, Ohio (AP)** -- A double murderer scheduled to be executed next month in Ohio said Tuesday he has not deliberately gained weight to rule out his death by lethal injection.

Killer Richard Cooley has gained 70 pounds since his incarceration, which he says should block his execution.

Instead, Richard Cooley said in a death row interview that his execution cannot be carried out humanely under current state procedures because his veins are hard to reach.

"Vein access was an issue even when I was back in the service," Cooley, 41, said in an hour-long interview with the Associated Press at the Ohio State Penitentiary.

Cooley, 5-foot, 7 inches tall and 267 pounds, said he has gained perhaps 70 pounds while being locked up for raping and killing two University of Akron students 22 years ago while he was on leave from the U.S. Army. He blamed the weight gain on medication and lack of exercise.

"It's hard getting access to my veins," said Cooley, who was handcuffed and locked in a closet-sized visiting room. He spoke through a straw-sized slit in a reinforced glass partition.

Cooley said he has heard secondhand about comedians' jokes about the Ohio inmate who claims he's too fat to be executed.

But he says that ridicule reflects ignorance of his underlying claim that it's the inaccessibility of his veins that makes it difficult to get an IV inserted for a lethal injection.

The legal challenge is based on constitutional issues and not fear of execution, Cooley said. "It has nothing to do with weight gain," he said.

Instead of lethal injection, "If it would make people happy, shoot me in the head with a .45," Cooley said. "Do it legally."

Cooley and a co-defendant kidnapped Wendy Offredo, 21, and Dawn McCreery, 20, after disabling their car by dropping a chunk of concrete on it from a highway overpass. They choked and beat the women to death after repeatedly raping them, then carved X's in their abdomens.

Cooley deflected questions about remorse and said his past comments about the victims and their families had been misunderstood. "I can't come out good," he said.

Cooley wouldn't say whether he would have something to say in the death chamber. He indicated there might be a new legal challenge to his execution, but he wouldn't detail any strategy because he didn't want to tip off prosecutors.

He reiterated claims he's made previously that he participated in crimes leading up to the slayings but denied beating the students to death. Summit County Prosecutor Sherri Bevan Walsh said his latest claims didn't merit further investigation.

Cooley, who would not discuss his prison life or his family, has been on death row since 1986.