THE ISSUE

Obesity has emerged as one of the most pressing public health challenges that this country faces at the threshold of the 21st century. Its prevalence has increased by an alarming 70 percent over the past decade, with obesity rates rising in both genders and across all population groups. Indeed, according to the U.S. Surgeon General, the number of overweight and obese Americans has reached epidemic proportions. In 1999, an estimated 61 percent of U.S. adults were overweight or obese, and 13 percent of children and adolescents were obese. Excess weight is linked to myriad chronic diseases, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, sleep apnea, gallbladder disease, and some cancers. The financial costs to the U.S. health care system caused by overweight and obesity are quite substantial.

SNAPSHOT OF SUCCESS

Health services researchers are providing critical evidence to show that obesity is a major driver of both health problems and health care costs, and that decision-makers should target it as aggressively as they do cigarette smoking through policy and practice interventions. Indeed, in a recent study of more than 9,800 adults, researchers found that overweight and obesity may be responsible for up to $92.6 billion in medical expenditures each year—or 9.1 percent of total annual health care costs—which rivals the financial impact of smoking-related illness. The study was released as a Web exclusive by the journal Health Affairs on May 14, 2003.

The study, which was funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), used data from the late 1990s drawn from two large national surveys of adults aged 19 and older. It was led by Eric Finkelstein, an economist at RTI International in North Carolina. According to the findings, obese individuals incur annual medical costs that are 37 percent ($732) higher than those of normal weight persons. Approximately half of obesity-related health care costs are borne by Medicare and Medicaid, the government’s health care programs for the elderly, poor, and disabled, the study found.

A 2002 study conducted by Roland Sturm, a senior economist at RAND, reached similar conclusions. It found that the effects of obesity on a number of chronic conditions were larger than those of smoking or problem drinking among adults aged 18 to 65. These results are part of a growing body of research indicating that obesity has become a national policy priority.

Health care leaders and policymakers are just starting to consider broad-scale programs and practices encouraging people to lose excess weight—in part because obesity is a relatively new public health scourge that has not been investigated as thoroughly as smoking. “Obesity research is a newcomer in health services and policy research,” says Sturm, “in contrast to a long tradition of influential work on tobacco and alcohol.”

But as the prevalence of obesity continues to soar, researchers are making just as strong a case to address this issue as they did for smoking. “Given that overweight- and obesity-related spending now rivals spending attributable to smoking,” says Finkelstein, “it may be increasingly difficult to justify the disparity between the many interventions that have been implemented to reduce smoking rates and the paucity of interventions aimed at reducing obesity rates.”

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Researchers define overweight and obesity using a measure called Body Mass Index (BMI), which is a more accurate way of measuring weight than by pounds alone. Overweight is defined as having a BMI of at least 25, while obesity is a BMI of 30 or higher. BMI is the ratio of a person’s weight (in kilograms) to height (in meters) squared. You can use the following equation to calculate BMI using conventional measures for weight (pounds) and height (inches).

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\text{BMI} = \frac{(703)(\text{weight in pounds})}{(\text{height in inches})^2}
\]

You can also use a Web calculator to determine your BMI. Visit www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/calc-bmi.htm.

Researchers developed their definitions of overweight and obesity using epidemiological data indicating that BMIs above 25 and, especially those above 30, are associated with increased mortality.

### FACTS

Approximately 300,000 deaths are associated with overweight and obesity each year.

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**

The proportion of adolescents from poor households who are overweight or obese is twice that of adolescents from middle- and high-income households.

**Healthy People 2010**

Today there are nearly twice as many overweight children, and three times as many overweight adolescents, as there were in 1980.

**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services**

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**What is health services research?**

Health services research examines how people get access to health care, how much care costs, and what happens to patients as a result of this care. The main goals of health services research are to identify the most effective ways to organize, manage, finance, and deliver high quality care; reduce medical errors; and improve patient safety.

— Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2002

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**FURTHER READING**


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**TOOLS FOR PATIENTS AND PROVIDERS**

- **Weight Wellness Profile**
  
  [www.obesity.org/education/profile.shtml](http://www.obesity.org/education/profile.shtml)

- **Healthy People 2010 Toolkit**
  
  [www.healthyvision2010.org/resources](http://www.healthyvision2010.org/resources)

- **American Dietary Guidelines**
  
  [www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/dga](http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/dga)

- **The Weight-Control Information Network, National Institutes of Health (NIH)**
  

- **National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute**
  
  [www.nhlbi.nih.gov/guidelines/obesity/ob_home.htm](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/guidelines/obesity/ob_home.htm)

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**WEB SITES**

- **American Obesity Association**
  
  [www.obesity.org](http://www.obesity.org)

- **International Obesity Task Force**
  
  [www.iotf.org](http://www.iotf.org)

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**A campaign to raise awareness of the value and impact of health services research**

[www.academyhealth.org/connectingthedots](http://www.academyhealth.org/connectingthedots)