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Overweight Adults Face Increased Health, Economic Challenges

Study finds more chronic medical problems, unemployment at age 40

July 19, 2010 - Forty-year-olds who have been consistently overweight since high school are far more likely to face chronic health concerns such as high blood pressure and heart disease, compared with adults who have gained weight gradually during their 20s and 30s, according to a study published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*. These same adults also are more likely to be receiving welfare or unemployment compensation.

Using data that tracked several thousand people for more than two decades, the researchers found that men and women who were persistently overweight as adults were more than three times as likely to have a medically diagnosed problem at age 40, including conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and hypertension. This group also was more than 50 percent more likely to receive welfare or unemployment compensation—an outcome that authors say indicates the connection between the risk of those economic challenges and the health problems and lower education levels associated with being overweight.

“This study shows the significant and long-term health and socioeconomic effects associated with persistent overweight and obesity,” said lead author Philippa Clarke of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. The study was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) through its research program Bridging the Gap. “The health and economic outcomes were dramatic, and many held regardless of race, ethnicity or gender,” Clarke noted.

Clarke and her colleagues analyzed national data from the Monitoring the Future project (which is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse) that followed more than 5,000 people from high school graduation until age 40, tracking a variety of health, social and economic indicators for 22 years. They separated the participants into two groups: those who were overweight at age 19 and continued to be overweight or obese throughout adulthood, and those who had a healthy weight at age 19 and steadily gained weight as adults.

They then looked for the presence of any one of six chronic health problems: high blood pressure, diabetes, asthma, lung disease, heart disease or cancer. They also examined whether people were on welfare or receiving unemployment compensation at 40, owned a home, had a partner, or had continued their education beyond high school.

“Obesity has numerous negative effects that linger for decades, which is why preventing it in childhood is so important,” said C. Tracy Orleans, Ph.D., RWJF senior scientist. “Providing children with access to healthy food and opportunities for physical activity can help them avoid a wide range of serious health problems later in life.”

The researchers did find that students who got better grades in high school were less likely to be persistently overweight as adults, suggesting that academic achievement might have some protective effect. “Even for those children who came from lower-income backgrounds, getting better grades in high school meant they were less likely to be overweight as adults. It may be that supporting them in school ultimately provides some health benefits as well,” Clarke said.

Overall, women and those from a lower socioeconomic status in childhood were more likely to be persistently overweight.

The full title of the article is “Midlife Health and Socioeconomic Consequences of Persistent Overweight Across Early Adulthood: Findings from a National Survey of American Adults (1986–2008)”. Clarke’s coauthors were Patrick M. O’Malley, John E. Schulenberg and Lloyd D. Johnston.

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About Bridging the Gap

Bridging the Gap is a nationally recognized research program dedicated to improving the understanding of how policies and environmental factors influence diet, physical activity and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. For more information, visit www.bridgingthegapresearch.org.

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