

Obesity Health Costs Outweigh Smoking

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March 12, 2002 -- Our obesity epidemic may be contributing more to America's rising health care and drug costs than the better-known evils of smoking and alcohol abuse -- indicating that obesity may be more harmful to our health.

Researchers say being obese increases how much a person spends on medical services by 36% and on medications by 77% compared with what a normal-weight person would spend.

In comparison, even with all the known health risks of smoking and alcohol abuse, the researchers found only a 21% rise in health care costs and a 28% rise in medication costs with active smoking, and even more modest cost increases with alcohol abuse.

In fact, the report suggests that being obese effectively ages you 20 years, putting an obese 30-year-old in the same risk group as a normal-weight 50-year-old for developing lifelong medical problems like cancer, heart disease, and diabetes.

Who, exactly, is obese? Anyone with a body mass index -- a measure of weight in relation to height -- of more than 30. For example, someone who is 5 feet 8 inches tall and weighs 197 pounds or more. According to a recent report by the Surgeon General, 27% of Americans fall into that category, and a staggering 61% of us qualify as overweight.

The study, published in the March/April issue of *Health Affairs*, adds to mounting concerns that the rapidly growing number of overweight and obese Americans could significantly harm the nation's overall health.

Obesity increases risk of lifelong medical conditions more than smoking or alcohol abuse, says study author Roland Sturm, an economist at RAND, a nonprofit think tank, in a news release. And obesity does more damage to quality of life. "Only 20 years aging has similarly-sized effects," he says.

Recent studies show about one in five Americans is obese, and obesity has grown by about 60% between 1991 and 2000.

He also points out that some other health-related aspects of smoking and problem drinking were not included in this economic study and may affect their overall impact on public health. For example, smoking may still account for more premature deaths and alcohol is likely to account for more accidental deaths.