
Obese Have Heftier Medical Bills Despite Shortened Lives

By Nanci Hellmich, USA TODAY

Obese twentysomethings - those who are 30 or more pounds overweight - will have lifetime medical bills that are \$5,000 to \$21,000 higher than their normal-weight peers.

And extremely obese young adults - 70 or more pounds overweight - will incur \$15,000 to \$29,000 more in lifetime medical expenditures than their healthy-weight peers, according to a study in the journal *Obesity*, published in advance online. These numbers take into account a shorter life expectancy for heavy people.

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The data add to mounting evidence that obese people have significantly higher medical costs. About one-third of people living in the USA are obese, which puts them at an increased risk of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, some types of cancer and other diseases.

STUDY: Weight contributes to illness

"We have prior work that shows that obese people miss more days of work and have a lower quality of life," says lead author Eric Finkelstein, an economist with RTI International, a non-profit research organization in Research Triangle Park, N.C.

For the latest study, he and colleagues analyzed national data on medical expenditures and life expectancy. They found that the greater the weight, the higher the medical costs.

And medical expenditures are much greater in obese white women than obese black women. One possible reason: White women tend to use more health services at every weight, Finkelstein says.

Obese people have shorter life spans, but they still have much higher lifetime medical costs.

Because people switch jobs so often, companies may not save money on health care by offering expensive obesity treatments, such as bariatric surgeries, says Finkelstein, co-author of *The Fattening of America*. "Any cost savings from these treatments may be realized by another company."

The government may have the greatest motivation to invest in obesity intervention, however, because many of the diseases related to extra weight occur when people are older and on Medicare, he says.

Gary Foster, president of the Obesity Society, an organization of weight-control researchers and professionals, says, "There has to be a two-prong approach: weight-control services for employees and policy changes at work that make the difficult task of weight control easier for employees."

Finkelstein says companies should consider serving foods lower in fats and sugar in cafeterias and vending machines, offering financial incentives for losing weight and subsidizing gym memberships.

Roland Sturm, a senior economist for the Rand Corp. who has done several studies on obesity's cost and its effect on quality of life, says low-tech changes, such as easy pedestrian and bicycle access and staircases that are clean, painted and accessible, are promising. But, he says, "no glossy brochure from human resources advertising the benefits of using stairs can compete with the security department's alarmed stairwell locks on the ground floor.

"It doesn't take much to discourage somebody from taking the staircase or trying to bike to work. "



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