Obesity related illness consumes a sixth of US healthcare budget

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The medical costs of obesity in the United States may be double previous estimates, a new study concludes.

As much as 17% of medical expenditure in the US goes towards the treatment of illnesses caused by obesity, says the study (www.nber.org/papers/w16467), from the National Bureau of Economics Research, an independent, non-profit organisation that is based in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The authors, John Cawley, associate professor of policy analysis and management at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, and Chad Meyerhoefer, assistant professor of economics at Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, analysed data concerning nearly 14 000 non-elderly adults for 2000 to 2005.

They concluded that the annual medical expenditure for obesity related illnesses in the US among adults aged 18 or older was \$168bn (\£110bn; \€120bn) (in 2005 dollars), which constitutes 16.5% of the \$1.02 trillion in medical expenses for adults in 2005.

A previous study found that obesity accounted for 9.1% of annual medical spending and that average medical spending for obese people was 42% higher than that for people of a healthy weight (Health Affairs doi:10.1377/hlthaff.28.5.w822).

The authors of the new study say that previous studies may have yielded less accurate results for two reasons: firstly, they estimated the costs associated with obesity rather than the costs of treating conditions caused by obesity; secondly, the data on weight and height were self reported, something that tends to result in substantial reporting error.

Including data about the subjects' children allowed the researchers to examine genetic components of obesity (only adults with children were included in the study). If children were also obese, medical expenses were treated as being associated with obesity. The authors say this helped to distinguish the true burden of obesity from other problems, such as depression or injuries, that could result in obesity.

Genes rather than environmental factors, say the authors, play the most important role in obesity. Their review included selected literature on the topic, and they concluded that “contrary to conventional wisdom” environmental factors have little relevance when it comes to obesity. They acknowledge that some studies do report environmental correlation, but “the preponderance of evidence” is that “any such effects are so small as to be undetectable and ignorable.”

Dr Crawley told the BMJ that finding an illness not related to or exacerbated by obesity proved to be no easy task. Research has established biological pathways connecting obesity to type 2 diabetes, sleep apnoea, hypertension, myocardial infarction, stroke, gallstones, gout, cancer, osteoarthritis, asthma, and gastro-oesophageal reflux.

Among the few conditions not apparently related to obesity, the authors say, were some conditions related to the central nervous system, such as epilepsy and brain damage.

Notes

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