



CDC: Severe Obesity on the Rise

[A recent report](#) from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reveals alarming trends in the prevalence of obesity and severe obesity among adults in the United States. Data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) collected between August 2021 and August 2023 shows that more than 40 percent of American adults are obese. The rates vary significantly by age, gender, and education levels.

Prevalence by Age and Gender

Obesity continues to affect a significant portion of the adult population, with 40.3 percent of adults falling into this category. No significant difference was observed between men and women, with prevalence rates of 39.2 percent and 41.3 percent, respectively.

Age appears to play a role in obesity rates. Adults aged 40-59 reported the highest obesity prevalence at 46.4 percent, compared to 35.5 percent in adults aged 20-39 and 38.9 percent in those 60 and older. The data suggests that middle-aged adults are more affected by obesity than their younger or older counterparts.

Obesity and Education Level

The NHANES data further revealed that obesity prevalence is linked to educational attainment. Adults with a bachelor's degree or higher had a lower obesity rate (31.6 percent) compared to those with less education. For instance, adults with only a high-school diploma or less exhibited an obesity prevalence of 44.6 percent. Those with some college education showed a rate of 45.0 percent.

Severe Obesity Climbing

While the overall obesity rate has remained steady since 2013-2014, the prevalence of severe obesity has increased, now standing at 9.4 percent — up from 7.7 percent in previous years. Severe obesity is more common among women (12.1 percent) than men (6.7 percent). Middle-aged adults (ages 40-59) show the highest rate of severe obesity at 12.0 percent.

Women in particular are experiencing higher rates of severe obesity across all age groups, with the most pronounced differences in younger adults (ages 20-39).

Implications

Obesity is a chronic condition associated with serious health risks. Those include hypertension, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, certain cancers, and even [dementia](#). As obesity and severe obesity continue to rise, particularly among women and middle-aged adults, it is crucial for public-health initiatives to focus on prevention and intervention strategies tailored to high-risk groups, says the



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report.

Obesity contributed to an estimated \$173 billion in medical expenses in 2019, according to the CDC. The agency also warns that obesity impacts the nation's military readiness, noting that only two in five young adults meet the weight and fitness requirements necessary for basic training.

Obesity and BMI

Obesity is often measured using Body Mass Index (BMI), calculated by dividing weight in kilograms by height in meters squared. While BMI estimates body fat, it doesn't account for muscle mass, bone density, or fat distribution. A BMI of 30 or higher is considered obese, with severe obesity at 40 or above. Despite its limitations, BMI remains widely used in public health due to its simplicity and cost-effectiveness.

Regional Rates

The CDC report comes on the heels of [the recent data](#) from U.S. states and territories published earlier this month. For the first time since 2013, 48 participating states posted an obesity rate higher than 20 percent, with 23 states reporting that more than one in three adults were obese. West Virginia "leads" the nation with over 41 percent of adults classified as obese. In contrast, Washington, D.C., reported the lowest rate, just under 24 percent.

Obesity rates were notably higher in the Midwest and the South, where many states saw more than one-third of their adult populations affected.

Obesity and Race

The state data also shows significant differences in obesity rates across racial and ethnic groups. Non-Hispanic black adults had the highest obesity prevalence, with 38 states and territories reporting rates of 35 percent or higher. Hispanic adults followed closely, with 34 states and territories surpassing this threshold. Non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaska Native adults also exhibited high obesity rates, with 30 states reaching the 35 percent mark. Non-Hispanic white adults had comparatively lower obesity rates, with 16 states at or above 35 percent. Notably, no state or territory reported an obesity prevalence of 35 percent or higher among non-Hispanic Asian adults.

Healthy at Any Size?

Several factors likely drive the rise in obesity in the United States. Those include sedentary lifestyles, access to unhealthy foods, and socioeconomic conditions. Solveig Cunningham, a global health professor at Emory University specializing in obesity, said in an interview with [The Hill](#) that while it is unclear why severe obesity rates are increasing, particularly among women, hormonal factors and the impact of childbearing might play a role. However, this explanation may not fully account for the rise. Women in previous decades were thinner despite having more children.

A significant cultural shift, largely influenced by the body-positivity movement, has likely played a role, especially among young women. The movement has earned praise for promoting self-acceptance and fighting stigma, but it has also faced criticism for normalizing obesity. Critics argue that by encouraging body acceptance at any size, the movement downplays the serious health risks linked to the condition.

For young women, the focus on "self-love" and rejecting pressure to be thin can sometimes overshadow the importance of a healthy weight. This shift complicates public health efforts, making it harder to balance body acceptance with promoting [healthy lifestyle choices](#).



Written by [Veronika Kyrylenko](#) on September 25, 2024

Big Pharma to the Rescue?

Amid the growing obesity epidemic, pharmaceutical companies are aggressively promoting weight-loss drugs such as semaglutide (marketed as Ozempic and Wegovy) and tirzepatide (sold as Mounjaro and Zepbound). These medications have shown promising results in helping patients shed significant weight. However, questions remain about long-term effectiveness and safety, accessibility, and the role of lifestyle changes alongside medication.



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