The Impact of Women's Weight on Health Outcomes: A Problem for Now and the Future

Abstract:
A recent report prepared for the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing by the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health (ALSWH) has further highlighted the need to monitor current trends of weight gain in Australian women.

The Australian Longitudinal Study on Women’s Health (ALSWH) is a population based longitudinal survey funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. The project began in 1996 and involves three large, nationally representative, cohorts of Australian women. When first recruited in 1996 the Younger women were aged 18 to 23 years; the Mid-aged women 45 to 50 years and the Older women aged 70 to 75 years. These women have now completed four surveys about their lifestyles and health outcomes.

Over the 12 years of the study there has been an overall increase in the women’s weight, particularly for women in the Younger and Mid-age cohorts. At survey 1, Younger women had the lowest average weight and Body Mass Index (BMI). At this time, 2 in 10 were classified as overweight and obese, 10 years later at survey 4 almost 4 in 10 were classified as overweight or obese. The rapid increase in weight in this cohort means that the BMI pattern for the Younger women aged 28 to 33 years of age is fast approaching the pattern seen for the Mid-age cohort when they were 45 to 50 years of age. If this rate of weight gain continues, the cohort of Younger women will be substantially heavier than the Mid-aged women by the time they reach 45. The Mid-age women are also experiencing weight gain, while not as rapid as the Younger women there has been a steady increase from survey 1, where almost 4 in 10 Mid-aged women were classified as overweight or obese to survey 4 where the prevalence increased to almost 6 in 10.

What do these results mean for the future? As obesity levels rise in an ageing population, it may be that the health gains of recent generations could be overturned. The research from the ALSWH demonstrates the relationship between overweight and obesity and chronic disease, poorer mental and physical health, and higher health care costs. Overweight and obesity contribute significantly to poor health and disability among women in Australia. At a population level, reversing these trends has the potential to have considerable impact on the good health of women as they age, and on health and other care costs.

Further information about the study or report is available at http://www.alswh.org.au

Reference

1The report uses the cut-off for BMI categories (underweight, healthy weight, overweight and obese) as defined by the WHO. At each survey women are asked to report their height and weight. These self-reported data are used to calculate body mass Index (BMI). BMI is calculated as weight (kg) dived by the square of height (m). It is then categorised as: Underweight (< 18.5); healthy weight (18.5 - 25); overweight (25 - 30); obese ( ≥ 30).