Health Research

The Impact of Obesity on Active Life Expectancy in Older American Men and Women

The public health concern with obesity in the United States has been well documented for over 20 years. The literature on the relationship of obesity to mortality is beginning to suggest that it varies by age. Therefore, Reynolds, et al., chose to analyze the effects of obesity on mortality and disability in adults at 70 years and older. They used the first three waves of data from the Asset and Health Dynamics Among the Oldest Old (AHEAD) study.

An active life was defined by having no difficulty performing any functions necessary for the activities of daily living (ADLs). Disability was defined as having difficulty with one or more ADLs; regardless of function level, anyone residing in a nursing home was counted as disabled. Obesity was defined as a body mass index (BMI) of 30 or more.

People with disabilities both improve and decline so these researchers chose a multi-state life-table method to estimate total and active life expectancy. This also allowed a differentiation in mortality profile by disability state. Three states of conditions were defined, two as living: active and disabled; and one as deceased. The transitions of the sample were followed into different conditions and examined by obesity and non-obesity. There was no significant difference in the likelihood of death for the obese or non-obese in men or women, but a significant risk of becoming disabled.

These findings support others and inform policy. "Public health policy for older adults should be concerned with the prospect of growing numbers of longer-lived disabled obese adults" (Arterburn et al., 2004).

Reynolds, S., Saito, Y. and Crimmins, E., The Gerontologist, Vol. 45, 2005.