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Economic penalty of extra pounds

U-M study identifies the cost of obesity to middle-aged women

WASHINGTON, D.C.---Extra pounds can be expensive for middle-aged women, according to University of Michigan researchers analyzing data on more than 7,000 men and women in their 50s and 60s.

The findings, presented here Nov. 19 at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, suggest that the economic cost of obesity is high and that it continues as women age.

Analyzing data from the U-M **Health and Retirement Study, funded by the National Institute on Aging**, the researchers at the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR), the world's largest academic survey and research organization, investigated labor market and wealth consequences for obese and non-obese women.

They found that in 1992 the individual net worth of a moderately to severely obese woman between the ages of 51 and 61 was about 40 percent less than that of her non-obese counterpart, after statistically controlling for health, marital status, and a number of other demographic factors.

In 1998, a moderately to severely obese woman between the ages of 57 and 67 had an individual net worth of about 60 percent less than her non-obese peer, an average difference of about \$135,670, again controlling for important demographic and health factors.

The effects of obesity were generally smaller for men and not statistically significant.

"Much of the previous work on the economic effects of obesity has focused on young adults who are just beginning their careers," says Nancy H. Fultz, a social scientist at the U-M ISR who presented the study in Washington, D.C., with U-M colleagues Stephanie J. Fonda, Laura M. Wheeler, and Linda A. Wray.

In the study, one of the first to examine the economic effects of obesity on mature men and women, the researchers examined a wide range of demographic, physical

and mental health characteristics to see whether these factors explained the economic differences between obese and non-obese women.

Although these factors were important variables in understanding net worth, they did not explain all the difference between the net worth of obese and non-obese women. "That an effect of obesity on net worth remains even when we consider these other factors is consistent with the notion that obesity is economically burdensome for women. This may be due to cultural norms of attractiveness, which stigmatize obese women in a variety of ways," the researchers conclude.

The Health and Retirement Study is conducted at the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR). Established in 1948, the ISR is among the world's oldest survey research organizations, and a world leader in the development and application of social science methodology. ISR conducts some of the most widely-cited studies in the nation, including the Survey of Consumer Attitudes, the National Election Studies, the Monitoring the Future Study, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, and the National Survey of Black Americans. ISR researchers also collaborate with social scientists in more than 60 nations on the World Values Surveys and other projects, and the Institute has established formal ties with universities in Poland, China, and South Africa. Visit the ISR Web site at <http://www.isr.umich.edu/> for more information.

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The Economic Cost of Obesity to Women and Men in their 50s and 60s

Women (n = 4,122)

Percentage normal to overweight (BMI<30)	73.8
Percentage mildly obese (BMI 30 to 35)	17.2
Percentage moderately to severely obese (BMI>35)	9.0

Men (n = 3,267)

Percentage normal to overweight (BMI<30)	78.6
Percentage mildly obese (BMI 30 to 35)	17.2
Percentage moderately to severely obese (BMI>35)	4.2

Average Adjusted Individual Net Worth

Women	1992	1998
Normal to overweight	\$145,017	\$225,973
Mildly obese	\$165,646	\$247,140
Moderately to severely obese	\$ 86,865	\$90,303
Men		
Normal to overweight	\$146,038	\$244,161
Mildly obese	\$165,648	\$237,185
Moderately to severely obese	\$201,314	\$237,999

Source: University of Michigan Health & Retirement Study

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