

Modern Healthcare

Battle to curb obesity is failing, CDC reports

By [Andis Robeznieks](#) | November 12, 2015

Just when a JAMA editorial this September saw a “glimmer of hope” that U.S. obesity (and diabetes) rates had leveled off, a new survey slashed those hopes.

The government Thursday released data that show obesity continuing to creep upward with women having higher rates than men and both having increasing rates as they get older.

For the past several years, experts thought the nation's alarming, decades-long rise in obesity had leveled off. But the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that the obesity rate climbed to nearly 38% of adults in 2013-14, up from 32% about a decade earlier.

“This is a striking finding” and suggests that a situation that was thought to be stable is getting worse, said Dr. William Dietz, an obesity expert at George Washington University.

But other experts urged people to be cautious about how they interpret the report.

The University of North Carolina's Barry Popkin said the participants selected for the study may not have been representative of the nation as a whole.

And Dr. Scott Kahan of the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health, chided the media for blowing a blip in the data out of proportion.

“I don't get worried from this data,” said Kahan, medical director for the Strategies to Overcome and Prevent Obesity Alliance. “We're very early in the public health approach to obesity.”

He compared it to the anti-smoking movement. Definitive data came out in the 1940s that smoking was harmful, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an anti-smoking report in 1964, and then policy decisions taking cigarette marketing off of television were made in 1970.

“It took a half century of effort to accrue the benefits we're now seeing,” Kahan said. “These are complex efforts that take time.”

The report also found the scales tipping toward women. Obesity rates for men and women had been roughly the same for about a decade. But in the new report, the rate was significantly higher for women, 38.3% compared with 34.3% for men.

Jocelyn Johnson, community education dietitian and registered dietitian with Sanford Health in Sioux Falls, S.D., attributed the higher female obesity rates—particularly for middle-age women—to weight gain during pregnancy and hormonal shifts.

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"I also think women are more likely to be 'emotional eaters' than men, with more stress eating," Johnson said.

Obesity—which means not merely overweight, but seriously overweight—is considered one of the nation's leading public health problems. Until the early 1980s, only about 1 in 6 adults were obese, but the rate climbed dramatically until it hit about 1 in 3 around a decade ago.

The new figures come from an annual government survey of about 5,000 participants. In interviews, people tend to understate their weight and overstate their height. But participants are actually weighed in this survey and thus it is considered the gold standard for measuring the nation's waistline.

The disheartening news comes after years of government anti-obesity campaigns to encourage people to eat better and exercise. Also, soda consumption has dropped in recent years, and fast-food chains have adopted healthier menus.

A study published in [Health Affairs](#) noted that a provision in the Affordable Care Act mandating calorie counts on menus for restaurants with more than 20 locations is set to take effect Dec. 1, 2016. But the researchers studied how a similar mandate in New York City that went in place in 2008 has had little effect on menu choices.

The widening gap between men and women seems to be driven by what's happening among blacks and Hispanics, said the study's lead author, the CDC's Cynthia Ogden.

Obesity rates for white men and white women remain very close. But for blacks, the female obesity rate has soared to 57%, far above the male rate of 38%. The gender gap is widening among Hispanics, too—46% for women, 39% for men.

The report also looked at obesity in children but did not see much change. For young people ages 2 to 19, the rate has been holding at about 17% over the past decade or so.

Health officials have been especially focused on obesity in kids, who are the target of the Let's Move campaign launched by first lady Michelle Obama in 2010.

The CDC measures obesity by calculating body mass index, a ratio of weight to height. For adults, a BMI of 25 to 29.9 is overweight, and 30 or higher is obese. According to CDC definitions, a 5-foot-10 man is overweight at 174 pounds and obese at 209.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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