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## Obesity Costs Rival Smoking

### Americans Spend Billions on Obesity-Related Health Care Costs

By [Jennifer Warner](#)  
WebMD Medical News

Reviewed By [Brunilda Nazario, MD](#)  
on Thursday, May 15, 2003

May 15, 2003 - The health care costs associated with obesity now rival those attributable to smoking, according to a new study. Researchers say obesity costs in the U.S. totaled up to \$92.6 billion last year, and government-funded public insurers Medicare and Medicaid financed about half of those expenses.

Federal statistics show that more than half of Americans are obese or overweight, and that number has grown dramatically over the last decade. Researchers say the obesity epidemic poses a major threat to public health due to the clear association between obesity and a variety of chronic diseases, such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.

In this study, researchers used statistics on obesity and medical spending provided by the CDC to estimate the health care costs attributable to obesity paid by insurance companies and individuals.

The results appear in the May 14 issue of the journal *Health Affairs*.

The study found that Americans spent \$78.5 billion in overweight and obesity costs in 1998 (\$92.6 in 2002 dollars). That figure translates to 9.1% of all national health care costs. Researchers say those health care costs are comparable to those associated with smoking, which are estimated at between 6.5% and 14.4% of total spending.

Even with health insurance, people that were obese or overweight paid more in health care costs than those of normal weight. In 1998, overweight and obese individuals paid an average of 11.4% and 26.1% more on out-of-pocket medical costs.

In addition, the study shows that Medicare had the highest prevalence of obese and overweight people combined, but Medicaid had the highest rates of obese patients.

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Accordingly, the health care costs attributable to obesity and being overweight were also highest among these groups.

"Therefore, as with smoking, there is a clear motivation for payers to consider strategies aimed at reducing prevalence of these conditions," writes researcher Eric A. Finkelstein, PhD, of RTI International in Research Triangle Park, N.C.

He says many health insurers include smoking cessation as a covered benefit and some private life insurance companies charge smokers much higher rates. Although some insurance companies subsidize health club memberships to encourage physical activity, Finkelstein says most do not include incentives to promote weight loss.

Since the amount of money spent on obesity-related health problems now rivals that spent on smoking, "it may be increasingly difficult to justify the disparity between many interventions that have been implemented to reduce smoking rates and the paucity of interventions aimed at reducing obesity rates," says Finkelstein.

SOURCE: *Health Affairs*, May 14, 2003.



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