



Health Spending Soars for Obesity

By Nancy Hellmich

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Researchers studied national health care data from 14,000 Americans in 1987 and 2002. They found the following:

Average cost to treat an obese person in 1987 was \$1784.00

Average cost to treat an obese person in 2002 was \$3454.00

Average cost to treat a normal weight person in 1987 was \$1512.00

Average cost to treat a normal weight person in 2002 was \$2210.00

(Source: Kenneth Thorpe, Emory University, and Atlanta. Figures adjusted for inflation)

Private health insurance spending on illnesses related to obesity has increased more than tenfold since 1987, according to the first research to quantify the trend. The growth in obesity has fueled a dramatic increase in the amount spent treating diabetes, heart disease, high cholesterol and weight-related illnesses, says the study, which was published in *Health Affairs*, an online journal of health policy and research.

Overall, employers and privately insured families spent \$36.5 billions on obesity-linked illnesses in 2002; up from inflation adjusted \$3.6 billion in 1987. That's up from 2% of total healthcare spending on obesity in 1987 to 11.6% in 2002, which is the latest year for which data is available.

On average, treating an obese person cost \$1,244, more in 2002 than treating a healthy-weight person did. In 1987, the gap was \$272.

And the obesity problem is "only going to get worse," says lead author Kenneth Thorpe, chairman of the department of health policy and management at Emory University in Atlanta. "The costs are up because so many more Americans are obese and because they're being more aggressively treated for weight-related illnesses."

About 31% of U.S. adults are obese—30 or more pounds over a healthy weight. That's up from 23% in the late 1980's and 15% in the late 1970's.

The study comes as businesses, the government and consumers are struggling with soaring health care costs. "Most of what is going on now to try to control health care spending is missing the target," Thorpe says. "Companies are tweaking co-pays and talking about health care savings accounts when really they need to redirect their focus to reduce the prevalence of obesity among children and workers."



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Thorpe and his colleagues analyzed national surveys of about 14,000 people from 1987 and 2002. The data included health care spending, medical conditions, and trips to the doctor, hospital and pharmacy. Findings:

*The percentage of obese people being treated for high cholesterol, mental disorders and upper gastrointestinal disorders increased 10 percentage points.

*The increase in adult-onset diabetes contributed to a 64% rise in diabetes treatment from 1987 to 2002.

*About 25% of the extremely obese (80 or more pounds overweight) were being treated for six or more conditions in 2002 compared with 14% in 1987.

Thorpe's findings add to growing evidence that extra pound's increase medical costs. A study last year by RTI International in Raleigh, NC. and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed that obese and overweight Americans racked up about \$75 billion in weight-related medical bills in 2003. Because much of this is covered by Medicare and Medicaid, taxpayers pay about half the total, the study found.