

Religious young adults become obese by middle age

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Could it be the potato salad? Young adults who frequently attend religious activities are 50 percent more likely to become obese by middle age as young adults with no religious involvement, according to new Northwestern Medicine research. This is the first longitudinal study to examine the development of obesity in people with various degrees of religious involvement.

“We don’t know why frequent religious participation is associated with development of obesity, but the upshot is these findings highlight a group that could benefit from targeted efforts at obesity prevention,” said Matthew Feinstein, the study’s lead investigator and a fourth-year student at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. “It’s

possible that getting together once a week and associating good works and happiness with eating unhealthy foods could lead to the development of habits that are associated with greater body weight and obesity.”

Previous Northwestern Medicine research established a correlation between religious involvement and obesity in middle-age and older adults at a single point in time. By tracking participants’ weight gain over time, the new study makes it clear that normal weight younger adults with high religious involvement became obese, rather than obese adults becoming more religious.

The research is being presented at the American Heart Association’s Nutrition, Physical Activity and Metabolism/Cardiovascular Disease

Epidemiology and Prevention Scientific Sessions 2011 in Atlanta, Georgia.

The study, which tracked 2,433 men and women for 18 years, found normal weight [young adults](#) ages 20 to 32 years with a high frequency of religious participation were 50 percent more likely to be obese by middle age after adjusting for differences in age, race, sex, education, income and baseline body mass index. High frequency of religious participation was defined as attending a religious function at least once a week.

Obesity is defined as having a body mass index of 30 or higher. A woman who is 5'5 and 180 pounds has a BMI of 30, for example.

The men and women in the study were part of the Coronary Artery Risk Development in Young Adults (CARDIA) multi-center study, supported by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute.

“Obesity is the major epidemic that is facing the U.S. population right now,” said senior study author Donald Lloyd-Jones, M.D., chair of preventive medicine at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and a cardiologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. “We know that people with obesity have substantial risks for developing diabetes, heart disease and certain types of cancer, and of dying much younger. So, we need to use all of the tools at our disposal to identify groups at risk and to provide education and support to prevent the development of obesity in the first place. Once the weight is on, it is much harder to lose it.”

The authors caution that their findings should only be taken to mean people with frequent religious involvement are more likely to become obese, and not that they have worse overall health status than those who are non-religious. In fact, previous studies have shown religious people

tend to live longer than those who aren't religious in part because they tend to smoke less.

“Here's an opportunity for religious organizations to initiate programs to help their congregations live even longer,” Feinstein said. “The organizations already have groups of people getting together and infrastructures in place that could be leveraged to initiate programs that prevent people from becoming obese and treat existing obesity.”

Feinstein noted Northwestern is leading such an educational intervention in a church on Chicago's West Side where members are taught how dietary changes and increased physical activity can lower cardiovascular disease risk factors such as [obesity](#), cholesterol and high blood pressure. “Church-based interventions have shown promising results,” he said.

Provided by Northwestern University

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