

Weight loss today keeps the doctor away

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Statistics show that today, almost one in four Canadians is obese. A deadly trend that has been on the rise for the last thirty years, obesity is associated with diabetes, heart disease and cancer. But is the obesity epidemic putting more pressure on an already strained Canadian health care system?

James McIntosh, a professor in the Department of Economics at Concordia University, is the first to look at the impact of obesity on the number of doctor visits nation-wide.

According to his research, [obese individuals](#) visit the doctor more frequently than regular smokers who are at a healthy weight.

"The fact that obesity is more serious than smoking helps people understand the gravity of the problem because they already have some kind of intuitive understanding of how bad smoking is," says McIntosh.

To calculate what would happen if obesity were eliminated entirely, McIntosh used a model created from data that included information from over 60,000 Canadians from the 2010 Community [Health Survey](#). He found that if obesity were not a factor, doctor visits would decrease by 10 percent.

Doctor visits may further decrease when one takes into account the many visits to the doctor for problems related to [type 2 diabetes](#), a disease is related directly to obesity.

It's also possible that obesity is the cause of even more doctor visits than estimated by McIntosh's model because the [national survey](#) does not include information about weight history. Someone who has developed obesity recently may not yet be experiencing the full effect of complications such as diabetes and the accompanying need for more medical care.

McIntosh hopes that his recommendation for the next survey to include weight history will lead to more accurate results on the effect of obesity on [doctor visits](#).

"The data is clear on the fact that people are overeating and under-exercising, and that has to change," says McIntosh. "I think academics have a responsibility to get policy makers interested in these serious problems."

One solution could be economic incentives. Just as smokers have higher life insurance premiums, people who are obese could also be made to pay more for health insurance. The complication is that obesity tends to be more prevalent among people with low income, making this solution difficult to implement.

Ultimately, McIntosh says a combination of approaches is necessary, including regulation of the fast-food industry.

"While the situation is serious, it's not catastrophic," says McIntosh. "But now is the time to act before it gets out of control."

More information: Cited Research:
economics.ca/2012/papers/MJ0009-1.pdf

Provided by Concordia University

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