

# Gen X overtaking baby boomers on obesity

November 1 2012

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

(Medical Xpress)—New research from the University of Adelaide shows that Generation X is already on the path to becoming more obese than their baby boomer predecessors.

Studies show that boomers currently have the highest level of obesity of any age group in [Australia](#). However, new research by University of Adelaide PhD student Rhiannon Pilkington has revealed some alarming

statistics. As part of her research, she has compared obesity levels between the two generations at equivalent ages.

Using data from the National Health Survey, Ms Pilkington compared [Generation X](#) in 2008 to boomers at the same age, in 1989.

"This comparison paints a very poor picture of Generation X. It gives rise to major concerns for the [future health](#) of Gen X and Australia's ability to cope with that burden," says Ms Pilkington, who is conducting her research in the University's Population Research & Outcome Studies group, School of Medicine.

"At the same age, Gen X males have nearly double the prevalence of obesity: 18.3% compared with 9.4% for boomers. There is a smaller but still significant difference in females, with 12.7% of Gen X women being obese in 2008 and 10.4% of boomer females obese in 1989.

"This does not bode well for the future health of Generation X," she says.

Ms Pilkington's PhD research covers the health status and health behaviours of Gen X and baby boomers, and the major role the workplace has to play in their health.

"Boomers and Gen X together make up more than 75% of Australia's workforce. Their health and the role of the workplace in promoting a healthy, or unhealthy, environment is of critical importance to the Australian economy, to society and to people's quality of life," Ms Pilkington says.

"Obesity has become the new smoking - it's a major driver of ill health, with coronary heart disease and type 2 diabetes highest on the list of preventable illnesses. Obesity also costs billions of dollars to our

economy each year. Anything we can do to mitigate the damage being done to both generations of Australians by obesity will be hugely important for the future of our nation."

Ms Pilkington says turning to the workplace is a logical step when considering how to have a positive impact on adult health.

"The Australian government has acknowledged this with substantial investment in the Healthy Workers Initiative - more than \$21 million has been granted to South Australia to deliver programs that will reduce the prevalence of being overweight and obese, and the associated behaviours in the workforce.

"We have a window of opportunity to change the health path that many boomers and Gen Xers are currently on," Ms Pilkington says.

Ms Pilkington's study considers various factors that influence the risk of being overweight or obese, such as: work stress, type of occupation and generation.

"Job strain occurs when people experience high demands and low control in their jobs. My research has shown that females are more likely to experience this type of work stress, and Gen X has a significantly higher risk. This is a concern given the known association between high job strain, coronary heart disease, metabolic syndrome, obesity and type 2 diabetes," she says.

The next step for Ms Pilkington is to conduct a survey to examine any health-promoting features at various workplaces, and the barriers to and enablers of new programs aimed at improving workers' health.

She says the kinds of intervention needed in the workplace would target the physical work environment as well as the psycho-social environment.

Potential programs/workplace changes could include:

- Physical activity programs;
- Access to healthy, nutritious and affordable foods (changing the default choice away from fast or junk food, which is often more easily accessible in or near the workplace);
- Alcohol and tobacco policies and programs;
- Mental health policies and programs;
- Flexible working options.

"The benefits to employers and employees of such changes include increases in productivity, decreases in absenteeism and presenteeism (when people are at work but are not productive), boosting staff morale, team bonding, and a reduction in staff turnover," Ms Pilkington says.

"As a nation, we need to be promoting programs and policies that will see sustained cultural and behavioural change. We need to encourage improved health at a population level and really tackle our preventable, lifestyle-driven chronic illnesses," she says.

Provided by University of Adelaide

Citation: Gen X overtaking baby boomers on obesity (2012, November 1) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-11-gen-baby-boomers-obesity.html>

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