

The cost of obesity examined

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Researchers from The University of Auckland have announced the results of a recent study showing that overweight and obesity in New Zealand costs the country between NZ\$722 million and NZ\$849 million a year in health care costs and lost productivity.

"These figures represent a major drain on health resources and point to a need to increase efforts on prevention," says Professor Boyd Swinburn from the School of [Population Health](#) at The University of Auckland.

He believes that timely action will bring cost-effective results and notes that Australia as part of its national push to increase productivity has invested \$870 million in programs to reduce obesity in workers, children and communities."

In New Zealand an estimated 35 percent of the population aged over 15 are overweight, while 25.4 percent are obese. Obesity has been well established as a key risk factor for major [chronic illnesses](#) such as cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes and some cancers.

Higher [overweight and obesity](#) rates amongst Maori and Pacific people meant that these [population groups](#) accounted for 29 percent of the total costs when they make up only 21.5 percent of the New Zealand population.

Health care costs, amounted to \$624 million, or 4.4 percent of New Zealand's [health care expenditure](#). Costs of lost productivity, through absenteeism, premature death, or recruitment and training of

replacement staff, was estimated to be between \$98m and \$225m, depending upon the methodology used.

"These figures demonstrate a substantial loss of productivity," says Professor Toni Ashton from The University of Auckland, "even without taking account of the costs which were not included - such as foregone taxes, costs of disability, and loss of well-being and quality of life."

Professor Swinburn says that "a recent benchmarking exercise for action on preventing obesity between New Zealand and Australia found that both countries performed poorly on policies such as reducing junk [food marketing](#) to children, simple front-of-pack traffic light labelling on processed foods and giving the food industry too much influence in developing public policies around food.

"However, Australia clearly outperformed New Zealand by investing in community, school and workplace programmes and by not having GST on fruit and vegetables. "

The study, which was based upon 2006 figures, was done in collaboration with Deakin University in Australia and University of Nebraska Medical Center in the United States and has been published in this month's issue of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*.

A previous study based on figures from 1991 estimated the [health care costs](#) of obesity alone in New Zealand at NZ\$135 million.

"However, this older estimate needed revision, using new and updated evidence," says Professor Ashton. "The prevalence of obesity has increased by more than ten percent since the last published estimate, and additional diseases have been identified as being attributable to obesity."

Provided by University of Auckland

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