

# Obesity-attributable absenteeism among US workers costs the nation more than \$8 billion annually

November 21 2014

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A study conducted by researchers at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health shows that obesity costs the U.S. \$8.65 billion per year as a result of absenteeism in the workplace —more than 9% of all absenteeism costs. The consequences of obesity among the working population go beyond healthcare and create a financial challenge not only for the nation but for individual states as well. Findings are published online in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*.

The study is the first to provide state-level estimates of obesity-attributable costs of [absenteeism](#) among working adults in the U.S. In Wisconsin, for example, costs for obesity-related absences from the job cost the state \$14.4 million; in California this figure rose to \$907 million. "In areas where local wage level is higher or have high burden of obesity, the value of lost productivity really adds up," said Y. Claire Wang, MD, ScD, co-director of the Obesity Prevention Initiative at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, and senior author.

To calculate the loss in worker productivity, [researchers](#) used nationally representative data about height, weight, and missed workdays for [health](#) reasons among 14,975 people from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey for the years 1998 to 2008. They also analyzed body mass index (BMI) data for 2012 by state for more than 100,000

people using the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System.

"Obesity and healthy-living behaviors are often seen as just individual choices," noted Wang, Mailman School associate professor of Health Policy and Management. "But our paper really highlights the fact that the burden is beyond just individual choices."

Previous studies of this kind tend to focus on healthcare cost resulted from treating obesity-related illness which is only one dimension of its burden to the society. For instance, in 2011, Wang and her colleagues published a study in Lancet estimating a \$66 billion higher medical expenditure by 2030 if the US trend in obesity continues. However, in thinking about obesity, especially severe [obesity](#), as a threat to a competitive, healthy workforce, the authors present this problem as a priority from an economic standpoint. "Healthy community and healthy workers mean business." Wang said.

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

Citation: Obesity-attributable absenteeism among US workers costs the nation more than \$8 billion annually (2014, November 21) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-11-obesity-attributable-absenteeism-workers-nation-billion.html>

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