

Google search data shows weight loss searches have increased over time while those on obesity have decreased

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New research on Google trends data presented at this year's European Congress on Obesity in Vienna, Austria (23-26 May) shows that over time, searches using the terms weight loss have increased, while those using the word obesity have decreased, potentially suggesting a normalisation of obesity in society. The study is by Dr. Aditya S. Pawar from the Mayo Clinic Department of Nephrology and Hypertension, Rochester, MN, USA, and colleagues.

The global epidemic of overweight and obesity has become a major public health concern. At least 2.8 million die each year as a result of being overweight or obese. In children, according to a study by the World Health Organization, around half of boys and 40% of girls were overweight. Recent studies have shed light on the 'normalisation' of obesity in the society but there are no formal studies evaluating public interest and awareness of the topic.

Dr. Pawar and colleagues studied data of awareness about obesity over the last twelve years worldwide. They used Google Trends which is based on the number of times worldwide the terms 'Obesity', 'Weight loss' and 'Obese' were searched for using Google between 1st January 2006 and 31st December 2017.

The program assigns a reference value of 100 for the point of maximum popularity among the search terms, and provides relative monthly scores

for all terms, which were termed relative interest scores (RIS).

The results found that the for the search term 'obesity', the mean RIS consistently decreased with each quartile. While the search term 'weight loss' RIS consistently increased with time.

The term 'weight loss' appeared to be especially popular during the month of January and its median RIS for January (n=12months) as compared to other months (n=122 months) was higher during the entire study period (88 vs 72), a result which was statistically significant. The RIS for term 'obese' did not change significantly over the study period.

Dr. Pawar concludes: "Despite an increase in the prevalence of obesity, its popularity on the internet continues to decrease with time as reflected by the RIS score, which may suggest 'normalisation' of obesity in our society. Reassuringly however, the frequency of the search term 'weight loss' has increased significantly overtime, with significant interest in January every year."

"While this may be secondary to New Year's resolutions centred around a healthy lifestyle, the specific reasons for the increased interest in certain months should be explored and applied to awareness campaigns for better effectiveness. While formal studies are required to best characterise these phenomenon, the use of Google trends certainly provides valuable data to assess the public awareness and possibly health related campaigns, which are vital to the success of managing obesity at the global level."

Provided by European Association for the Study of Obesity

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