

Impact of obesity on ability to work highest amongst women over 50

March 4 2020



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New research has shown that older workers with obesity are at a higher risk of prolonged sickness absence or losing their jobs for health reasons than those of normal weight, with women affected significantly more

than men.

Scientists from the University of Southampton studied the association between BMI and prolonged sickness absence, cutting down at work and health-related job loss among 2299 men and 2425 women aged between 50 and 64 years.

Obesity is a major and growing [public health problem](#), with future projections estimating that there will be more than one billion people affected globally by 2030. Being obese or overweight is a major risk factor for [non-communicable diseases](#) including diabetes; cardiovascular diseases; [musculoskeletal disorders](#) and common mental health conditions. Although obesity is becoming more prevalent in children and adolescents, the highest prevalence is seen amongst men and women in their fifties, sixties and seventies.

The participants in the study reported their height and weight at the start of the study then provided information about their ability to work after 12 and 24 months as part of Medical Research Council's Health and Employment after Fifty (HEAF) Study.

The University of Southampton team analysed the data from this study, publishing their findings in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. The research has shown that the women with obesity or severe obesity had greater odds of prolonged sickness absence compared with women of [normal weight](#). Those with severe obesity were also the most likely to cut down, avoid, or change what they did at work because of a health problems and were almost three times as likely to lose their job because of their health.

Amongst the men taking part in the survey, there was a slightly increased risk of prolonged [sickness absence](#) amongst those with obesity but no evidence of an association between above-average BMI and health-

related job loss.

Professor Karen Walker-Bone Director of the MRC Versus Arthritis Centre for Musculoskeletal Health and Work at the University of Southampton, who led the study, said: "Our study demonstrates the link between obesity and [health](#) problems that affect people's ability to work, particularly in older female workers. As a result, the burden of [obesity](#) in an aging population can be expected to hinder attempts to encourage work to older ages. These results should give employers an incentive to introduce measures that can help their employees maintain a healthy weight."

More information: Catherine H Linaker et al, Body Mass Index (BMI) and Work Ability in Older Workers: Results from the Health and Employment after Fifty (HEAF) Prospective Cohort Study, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2020). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph17051647](#)

Provided by University of Southampton

Citation: Impact of obesity on ability to work highest amongst women over 50 (2020, March 4) retrieved 19 April 2024 from

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