



Obesity surges among affluent Gap with poor all but disappears

by Nanci Hellmich | May 03 '05

Obesity, a condition that for decades has been more prevalent in the poor, is skyrocketing among affluent Americans, a study finds.

Defined as 30 or more pounds over a healthful weight, obesity has increased nearly threefold over a 30-year period among Americans who earn more than \$60,000 a year, according to researchers at the University of Iowa College of Public Health.

There is now little difference in obesity rates among income groups. In the 1970s, fewer than 10% of the most affluent were obese, compared with almost a quarter of those earning less than \$25,000. In 2001-02, just a handful of percentage points separated all income groups.

Nutrition experts are not surprised. "All income groups are exposed to the same environment," says George Blackburn of Harvard Medical School. "Since fast food is so cheap, no income group is protected. The same tasty food is available to the rich, and it's easy for them to fall into the same supersizing eating habits the poor are exposed to."

About 30% of Americans are obese, putting them at risk of developing diabetes, heart disease, cancer, arthritis and other diseases. About 112,000 deaths were blamed on obesity in 2000, the most recent year for which figures are available, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The Iowa team examined data from the government's National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys, in which people are weighed and measured. They compared the percentage of people who were obese in different income groups (adjusting to 2000 dollars) studied in 1971-74 and in 2001-02.

Researchers reported Monday at an American Heart Association conference in Washington, D.C., that obesity rates among those with a household income of more than \$60,000 a year have almost tripled in that time, from 9.7% to 26.8%. Among those making less than \$25,000, the increase was much smaller, from 22.5% to 32.5%.

The obesity rates have doubled over three decades for those making from \$25,000 to \$60,000.

"We have always thought that poor people were more likely to be obese, and rich people were more likely to be thin, but the highest income groups are catching up," says Jennifer Robinson of the University of Iowa, the study's lead author.

Allison Hedley of the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics did a similar analysis recently and found that obesity is increasing in higher economic groups for all race and ethnic groups.

Higher-income people may have more sedentary jobs, she says. Plus, physical inactivity and large portion sizes are affecting everybody, she says.

Says Louis Aronne, president of the North American Association for the Study of Obesity: "The study underscores that no socioeconomic group is immune from the epidemic of obesity."

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