OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY

The rise in overweight and obesity is a major public health concern. Obesity is a known risk factor for numerous health problems, including hypertension, high cholesterol, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, respiratory problems (asthma), musculoskeletal diseases (arthritis) and some forms of cancer. Because obesity is associated with higher risks of chronic illnesses, it is linked to significant additional health care costs. There is a time lag between the onset of obesity and related health problems, suggesting that the rise in obesity over the past two decades will mean higher health care costs in the future. Mortality also increases sharply once the overweight threshold is crossed.

**Definition**

Overweight and obesity are defined as excessive weight presenting health risks because of the high proportion of body fat. The most frequently used measure is based on the body mass index (BMI), which is a single number that evaluates an individual’s weight in relation to height (weight/height², with weight in kilograms and height in metres). Based on the WHO classification, adults with a BMI between 25 and 30 are defined as overweight, and those with a BMI over 30 are defined as obese.

**Comparability**

The BMI classification may not be suitable for all ethnic groups, who may have equivalent levels of risk at lower or higher BMI. The thresholds for adults are also not suitable to measure overweight and obesity among children. For most countries, overweight and obesity rates are self-reported through estimates of height and weight from population-based health interview surveys. However, around one-third of OECD countries derive their estimates from health examinations. These differences limit data comparability. Estimates from health examinations are generally higher and more reliable than estimates from health interviews.

The following countries use measured data: Australia, Canada, Chile, the Czech Republic, Ireland, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Mexico, New Zealand, the Slovak Republic, the United Kingdom and the United States.

**Overview**

Based on latest available surveys, more than half (53%) of the adult population in the OECD report that they are overweight or obese. In countries where height and weight were measured (as opposed to self-reported), the proportion was even greater, at 56%. The prevalence of overweight and obesity among adults exceeds 50% in no less than 20 of the 34 OECD countries. In contrast, overweight and obesity rates are much lower in Japan and Korea and in some European countries (France and Switzerland), although even in these countries rates have been increasing.

The prevalence of obesity, which presents even greater health risks than overweight, varies nearly tenfold in OECD countries, from a low of 4% in Japan and Korea, to over 32% in Mexico and the United States. On average across OECD countries, 18% of the adult population are obese. Average obesity rates among men and women are similar in most countries. However, in South Africa, the Russian Federation, Turkey, Chile and Mexico, a greater proportion of women are obese, while the reverse is true in Iceland and Norway.

The prevalence of obesity has increased over the past decade in all OECD countries. In 2011, at least one in five adults was obese in ten OECD countries, compared to five a decade ago. Since 2000, obesity rates have increased by a third or more in 16 countries. The rapid rise occurred regardless of where levels stood a decade ago.

The rise in obesity has affected all population groups, regardless of sex, age, race, income or education level, but to varying degrees. Evidence from Australia, Austria, Canada, France, Italy, Korea, Spain and the United States shows that obesity tends to be more common in disadvantaged socio-economic groups, especially in women. There is also a relationship between the number of years of education and obesity, with the more educated displaying lower rates.

**Sources**

- OECD (2013), OECD Health Statistics (Database).

**Further information**

**Analytical publications**

- OECD (2013), Cancer Care: Assuring Quality to Improve Survival, OECD Publishing.

**Statistical publications**


**Websites**

- OECD Health Data (supplementary material), www.oecd.org/health/healthdata.
Obesity rates among the adult population
Percentage of population aged 15 and over, 2011 or latest available year

Self-reported data  Measured data

Women  Men

Increasing obesity rates among the adult population
Percentage of population aged 15 and over

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