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Study: Minorities become obese faster than whites

By Nanci Hellmich, USA TODAY

Black and Hispanic women in their 20s and early 30s become obese faster than white women, and Hispanic men in the same age group become obese faster than white and black men, according to a study out Tuesday.

The findings suggest that experts may want to develop weight-management programs for adults in their early 20s, say study researchers.

Researchers with the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill analyzed the body mass index of 9,179 people followed over a 17-year period in the National Longitudinal Study of Youth. The age range of the people was 17 to 24 years in 1981 and 34 to 41 years in 1998. The weights and heights were self-reported.

The findings in Tuesday's *Annals of Internal Medicine*:

- African-American women become obese 2.1 times faster than white women.
- Hispanic women become obese 1.5 times faster than white women.
- Hispanic men become obese 2.5 times faster than white men.
- Black and white men develop obesity at about the same rate until age 28. After that, black men become obese 2.2 times more rapidly than white men.
- The data, which oversampled minority groups, revealed that 26% of the men and 28% of the women subjects were obese by age 35 to 37. Government statistics indicate that overall, 61% of adults weigh too much, and 27% are obese.
- Most subjects entered early adulthood at a normal weight or overweight but were not obese. About 80% of those who were obese by their mid-30s reached that weight category after age 20 to 22.

"From this we can't tell what's driving these ethnic-based differences in weight gain, but it's clearly an important question that needs to be looked at more closely," says Kathleen McTigue, a UNC-CH researcher and lead author of the study.


There are two possibilities for this trend, says psychologist Kelly Brownell, an obesity researcher at Yale University. "There may be some biological vulnerability that would make these groups more susceptible."

A second possibility is that some people may be at high risk for obesity because of their environment — their exposure to bad foods like junk food and fast food is high and opportunities to be active are minimal, he says.

"It may be an interaction of the two, but you never know until you do the right studies."

McTigue says that the latest study shows that early intervention is essential.

"If you can act early and prevent obesity, you can potentially prevent problems like diabetes and heart disease," she says.

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