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Lifetime medical costs of obesity

A new research paper published in PLoS Medicine suggests that preventing obesity might result in increased public spending on medical care. Many countries are currently developing policies aimed at reducing obesity in the population. However, it is not currently clear whether successfully reducing obesity will also reduce national healthcare spending or not. Pieter van Baal and colleagues, from the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment in the Netherlands, created a mathematical model to try to answer this question.

In their study, van Baal and his co-workers created three hypothetical populations of 1000 men and women, all aged 20 years at the start: a group of obese, never-smoking individuals; a group of healthy-never smoking individuals of normal weight; and a group of smokers of normal weight. The model produced an estimate of the likely proportion of each group who would encounter certain long term (chronic) diseases, and then estimated what the approximate cost of medical care associated with each disease was likely to be. The researchers found that the group of healthy, never-smoking individuals had the highest lifetime healthcare costs, because they lived the longest and developed diseases associated with aging; healthcare costs were lowest for the smokers, and intermediate for the group of obese never-smokers.

However, the authors argue that although obesity prevention may not be a cure for increasing expenditures, it may well be a cost-effective cure for much morbidity and mortality and importantly contribute to the health of nations.

A Perspective by Klim McPherson, from Oxford University in the UK, who was not involved in the study, discusses the implications of these findings and comments that it would be wrong to interpret the findings as meaning that public-health prevention (e.g., to prevent obesity) has no benefits the quality of life experienced by individuals, and other factors, must also be taken into account when planning interventions aimed at improving public health.

Citation: van Baal PHM, Polder JJ, de Wit GA, Hoogenveen RT, Feenstra TL, et al. (2008) Lifetime medical costs of obesity: Prevention no cure for increasing health expenditure. PLoS Med 5(2): e29. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.0050029

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Related PLoS Medicine perspective article:

Citation: McPherson K (2008) Does preventing obesity lead to reduced health-care costs? PLoS Med 5(2): e37. doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.0050037

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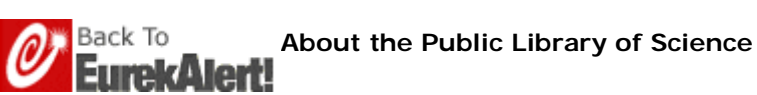
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