

Q: Is obesity a problem among older Americans?

A: Yes. Obesity-which is more than just being overweight--is not only a health problem for young people. There are 15 million people over the age of 51 who are considered obese, according to the Center on Aging Society. Over the past 20 years, rates of obesity among older people have grown dramatically. Of people over the age of 51, 75% of the obese are between the ages of 51 and 69-in other words, the "younger old."

Obesity is measured by your Body Mass Index (BMI), which is the relationship of weight-to-height. Of men age 51 and older, 23% are obese and 46% overweight. Of women over the age of 51, 24% are obese and 33% overweight. Women over the age of 51 are 39% more likely to be at a healthy weight than men.

Obesity is a risk factor for heart disease, diabetes, stroke, and several forms of cancer. Someone who is obese has a higher risk of having diabetes or high blood pressure in their 50s than a non-obese person in their 70s.

Among risk factors for bad health, obesity is one of the worst. Compared to smoking, heavy drinking, or poverty-obesity is the most serious. It affects more people than the others, and is more strongly linked to very high rates of chronic illness than the other three risk factors. The Center for An Aging Society compares the effects of obesity as being similar to the effects of twenty years of aging.

Older obese people are also twice as likely to have difficulties with tasks like eating, bathing and dressing than non-obese elders. Obese elders are also more likely to suffer from symptoms like shortness of breath, dizziness, severe fatigue, etc.

Obese seniors report that they more often feel symptoms of depression than their non-obese peers. Higher rates of feelings like sadness, hopelessness, and worthlessness among the obese elderly population may be due to the negative attitudes about the obese.

Obesity can also create lifestyle changes. Older obese adults say it's harder to walk any real distance, harder to go shopping or to the movies, or to take part in social activities. Forty-five percent of obese older adults (age 51 to 69) are no longer working, a rate 10% higher than non-obese people in this age group. Of those obese seniors who are still in the workforce, they're more likely to have missed work for health reasons than non-obese workers.

In a financial sense, obesity is a problem for all Americans. Medical spending for the treatment of illnesses related to obesity consumes a hefty 5% of total annual medical spending, or nearly \$27 billion annually-half of which is paid by Medicare or Medicaid. To calculate your own Body Mass Index, go to www.cdc.gov, and search by "Body Mass Index". To find out if you should lose weight, discuss the matter with your primary care doctor.