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Obesity threatens life expectancy

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By Nanci Hellmich, USA TODAY

Obesity could shorten the average lifespan of an entire generation — today's children — by two to five years, according to a controversial new life-expectancy analysis.

This could have a major effect on Medicare when obesity-related illnesses kick in, according to the researchers from several universities and hospitals. And it will affect Social Security because there will be fewer older people, they say.

Life expectancy in the USA is now at a high of 77.6 years. If the researchers' predictions hold true in the next 50 years, it would be the first reversal in life expectancy since the government started keeping track in 1900.

About 16% of kids today are overweight, and another 15% are at risk of becoming too heavy, which increases their chance of ailments such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

The team examined national obesity rates and data on the years of life lost to obesity. Among the projections published in today's *New England Journal of Medicine*:

- Obesity now reduces life expectancy by four to nine months.
- If childhood obesity continues unabated, people will have shorter lives because of the health toll of being heavy at such a young age.
- Minorities will be hit hardest because they have had the greatest increases in obesity and because many have limited access to health care.

"Childhood obesity is like a massive tsunami headed toward the United States," says pediatric endocrinologist David Ludwig, director of the obesity program at Children's Hospital in Boston and one of the study's authors.

But critics say the study is based on limited data and contend there is no good methodology for determining death rates from obesity.

"This study is just half a step removed from science fiction," says analyst Dan Mindus of the Center for Consumer Freedom, a non-profit coalition of restaurants, food companies and consumers. "It uses discredited methodology, and it makes dire warnings that are not supported by its own data."

Katherine Flegal, a scientist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, says, "We should be cautious about these projections, because we don't know what the effects will be of factors such as decreases in smoking and improvements in medical care."

But Ludwig counters: "We've never seen this level of obesity in the very young. We don't know how quickly the childhood obesity epidemic is going to translate into serious diseases."

Ludwig called for a "comprehensive strategy," including limiting the advertising of unhealthy foods to kids and improving school lunches.

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