

Not all obese individuals are at increased risk of dying early

Obese individuals are well known to be at greater risk for several health problems. However, some obese individuals have no other health problems other than their excess weight, and it is unclear whether these individuals are at an increased risk of dying early, and thus should lose weight.

The researchers looked at the mortality risk of 6,000 obese Americans, comparing to lean individuals over a 16-year span. Obese individuals were graded using a newly-developed tool, the Edmonton Obesity Staging System. This system is a simple tool that allows physicians to easily rank patients on a scale of 0 to 4, based upon the severity of weight-related health problems, mental health and quality of life, and better identify high-risk individuals who are most in need of weight-management interventions. Individuals who are free from all obesity related co-morbidities are categorized as stage 0, and those who have sub-clinical levels of obesity related co-morbidities such as pre-diabetes, pre-hypertension, occasional dyspnea, or mild physical or psychopathology are categorized as stage 1. Those with overt conditions that are diagnosed by their physician are categorized as stage 2. Stage 3 is end organ disease or significant psychopathology or functional limitations and stage 4 is severe end stage disease.

This study found that obese individuals who were otherwise healthy (stage 0 or 1) live just as long as their lean counterparts, and are less likely to die of cardiovascular causes. This illustrates that not all obese individuals are at an elevated health risk and that body weight alone cannot distinguish the healthy and unhealthy obese individuals.

Healthy obese individuals had a higher body weight in early adulthood, were happier with their higher body weight, and had attempted to lose weight less frequently during their lives. These individuals were also more likely to be physically active and consume a healthy diet.

These findings challenge the idea that all obese individuals need to lose weight. Most individuals repeatedly regain the weight they lose, and it is possible that this cycling of weight up and down may be more detrimental than maintaining an elevated body weight and engaging in a healthy lifestyle if the patient has no other health concerns. Thus, health professions should recognize the differences between obese individuals, and should not recommend weight loss to all obese individuals. Instead, it is important that health professionals encourage obese individuals to see their physician so that they can be graded using the Edmonton Obesity Staging System. That way, informed and individualized weight management care and physical activity advice can be provided to best match the health needs of each obese person.

Reference: Kuk JL, Ardern CI, Church TS, Sharma AM, Padwal R, Sui X, Blair SN. [Edmonton Obesity Staging System: association with weight history and mortality risk](#). *Appl Physiol Nutr Metab*. 36: 570–576, 2011

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