

Obesity-related cancers rise among US millennials

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Obesity-related cancers among millennials have climbed to rates higher than what was generally witnessed during the baby boomer generation, according to a recent scientific study. Astonishingly, the publication found that these cancers, which are typically present in elderly adults, have become increasingly common at younger ages over the past 20 years.

The study, published in *The Lancet* last month, found that between 1995 and 2014, out of the over 14 million incident cases for 30 types of cancer, incident occurrences increased significantly for six of 12 obesity-related cancers in young adults aged 25-49.

Funded by the American Cancer Society and the National Cancer Institute, the study examined data over a 20-year period, covering 67 percent of the US population.

It found that the risk of pancreatic, colorectal, endometrial and gallbladder cancers in millennials is far higher than baby boomers when they were the same age. This increase is steeper in progressively younger generations (individuals aged under 50) and successively younger generations (individuals born after 1950).

Senior author Ahmedin Jemal, vice president of Surveillance and Health Services Research for the American Cancer Society, told CNN that “the risk of cancer is increasing in young adults for half of the obesity-related cancers, with the increase steeper in progressively younger ages.”

Excessive body weight is a known carcinogen that is associated with over a dozen cancers, and the report provides further evidence that obesity is a significant risk factor for cancer. Besides cancer, obesity and being overweight are also major risk factors for other serious diet-related diseases and illnesses, including type 2

diabetes, cardiovascular disease and strokes.

Nearly 40 percent of adults are currently obese, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), while at least two-thirds are classified as either obese or overweight. The CDC found that 18.5 percent of children aged 2- to 19-years-old were obese.

Although cancer rates have fallen steadily over the past 25 years, due primarily to the reduction of lung cancer caused by smoking, the gradual increase in obesity-related cancers is beginning to roll back this progress.

The researchers stated that young adults still have an overall lower risk of developing these cancers compared to older adults. However, Jemal notes that the implications of the study for future trends in cancer diagnosis are harrowing.

“Cancer trends in young adults often serve as a sentinel for future disease burden in older adults, among whom most cancer occurs,” Jemal said.

One of the principal factors contributing to the rise in obesity rates among American adults is the lack of access to healthy foods among low-income and rural populations. Healthy foods like fruits, vegetables and high-quality proteins are often unaffordable for poor and working-class Americans.

A study published in the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* in 2007 found that low-income Americans would have to spend up to 70 percent of their food budget on fruits and vegetables to meet new national dietary guidelines for health eating.

Moreover, even if they could afford it, low-income residents in rural areas and inner-cities often cannot even access healthy foods. According to a 2010 report by the US Department of Agriculture, 23.5 million people live in “food deserts,” locations without a

nearby supermarket where healthier options are available and residents are instead forced to rely on convenience stores and fast-food restaurants.

Burdened by the rising cost of living, stagnant wages, and skyrocketing student debt, millennials have less time and fewer resources to address important health needs. As a result, they have increasingly turned toward unhealthy food options.

A survey conducted by the CDC this past October found that 45 percent of Americans aged 20 to 39 ate fast food on a given day. A study conducted by Bankrate.com discovered that 54 percent of millennials eat out at least three times a week or more.

Widening social inequality in the US is reflected in dietary differences between the rich and the poor. According to a 2016 article published by STAT, only 38 percent of low-income people (a family of four making around \$30,000) eat an intermediate diet (a diet quality better than poor, but not ideal), versus 62 percent of higher-income people (a family of four making around \$69,000).

The rise in obesity is not unique to the American population, but an expression of a wider and global public health crisis. The World Health Organization has called obesity a “rising epidemic,” with over 1 billion adults considered obese worldwide.



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