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Younger adults are accumulating excess weight earlier than previous generations, and this has implications for health

The prevalence of obesity among Canadian adults has increased over time with the most recent estimates indicating that about one-third have obesity. Obesity is associated with several health conditions, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers. The article "[The health consequences of obesity history and weight fluctuations in adulthood](#)" shows that having obesity at multiple time points throughout adulthood or experiencing large weight fluctuations further increases health risks.

Adults aged 25 years weighed less in the 1950s and 1960s compared with the 1990s and 2000s

Participants in the Canadian Health Measures Survey were asked to recall their weight at age 25. This allowed researchers to look at generational shifts in the timing of obesity onset. Adults who were aged 70 to 79 years at the time of the survey (i.e., who would have been 25 years old between 1953 and 1966) reported that their weight at age 25 was lower (-17.2 pounds for men, -13.2 pounds for women) than the weight at age 25 reported by adults who were aged 28 to 39 years at the time of the survey (i.e., who would have been 25 years old between 1993 and 2008).

Past obesity increases risk of poor health and chronic illness

Compared to never having obesity, respondents with a healthy weight at the time of the survey who had obesity at one point in their past had an increased risk of type 2 diabetes (3.3 times higher risk), high blood pressure (2.4 times higher risk), and poor or fair overall general health (2.0 times higher risk). Compared to never having obesity, those with obesity at the time of the survey and in the past had an increased risk of type 2 diabetes (5.4 times higher risk), high blood pressure (3.8 times higher risk), and poor overall general health (2.7 times higher risk).

Weight fluctuation associated with mobility and musculoskeletal problems

Compared to weight stable adults, experiencing a major weight fluctuation during adulthood (not including pregnancy) was associated with an increased risk of mobility and musculoskeletal problems, such as arthritis (1.6 times higher risk) or having pain that prevents physical activity (1.7 times higher risk). Compared to people with a weight that remained more stable across adulthood, having a large gap between one's highest and lowest adulthood weight was also associated with an increased risk of having a chronic health condition (1.9 times higher risk).

These findings, using two combined cycles of the Canadian Health Measures Survey (2007 to 2011), demonstrate the importance of considering people's weight history when estimating the health impacts of obesity on the population. Changes across time in the earlier onset of obesity and its longer duration suggest that the burden of obesity for the population is likely to increase over time.

Note to readers

The terminology used to refer to persons with obesity is consistent with the person-first language recommended by Obesity Canada. In practice, this means replacing terms like "obese people" with "people who have obesity" or "people with obesity." Source: <https://obesitycanada.ca/resources/people-first-language/>



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The article "[The health consequences of obesity history and weight fluctuations in adulthood](#)" is now available in the February 2025 online issue of *Health Reports*, Vol. 36, No. 02 ([82-003-X](#)).

This issue of *Health Reports* also contains the article "[Changes in life expectancy at birth during the COVID-19 pandemic and contributions by cause of death in British Columbia, Canada](#)."

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