

Weight watchers: We weigh a bit more

Obesity stands accused in a wide range of medical problems, but there has been no good estimate of its prevalence in the United States. In the midst of the long process of digesting data from a recent health survey of more than 10,000 persons, the National Center for Health Statistics has now released results on obesity in American adults. "The prevalence of adult obesity based on the criteria used is high and is relatively higher for women, particularly for Negro women," the preliminary report states.

The greatest prevalence of obesity (32.4 percent of those sampled) occurs among black women, 45 to 74 years old. Black men of the same age group show the least obesity (7.7 percent). Across ages, income levels and races, a greater percentage of women than men are obese. Among women, income below the poverty level correlates with a higher prevalence of obesity.

Although the Health and Nutrition Examination Survey collected data on heights and weights of the participants, the obesity results are based on measurements of the thickness of a pinch of skin. The major form of overweight in this country is excess fat from excess food intake, the report explains. Since much fat is located just under the skin, fatness may be best estimated by skin thickness. The report defined obesity by the thickness of a pinch of skin at the triceps on the upper arm. In "obese" people that thickness is greater than it is in 85 percent of men or women 20 to 29 years old. This standard is based on the concept that a healthy adult should not become fatter with age.

Patterns of adult weight gain, however, are apparent in the data collected in the

survey. Average weights of men increase most rapidly until 25 to 34 years of age, and eventually peak between 35 and 44 years for tall men and between 45 and 54 years for men shorter than 5 feet 8 inches. Average weights of women increase rapidly until 35 to 44 years, but don't peak until 55 to 64 years. The researchers as yet have no explanation as to why women continue to gain weight longer than men do.

The survey revealed that adults in the United States have, on the average, become a bit more rotund during recent years. In the new survey, adult men were approximately 4 pounds heavier than in a survey conducted between 1960 and 1962. Women younger than 45 also averaged about 4 pounds more than their counterparts of a decade earlier, although the weights of women older than 45 differed much less.

Children, as well as adults, were included in the study. Those of families with incomes above poverty level were heavier and slightly taller than those in the lower income group. White and black youngsters differed little in height and weight, but skinfold differences indicated a greater leanness in black children and youths.

The survey also looked for clinical symptoms that might indicate nutrient deficiencies. It found in general only a low prevalence of risk signs.

This survey is intended as the start of a national nutrition surveillance system, sampling representatives of the civilian, noninstitutionalized population covering a broad range of ages. Besides clinical signs of nutritional problems and various body measurements, the investigators recorded levels of nutrients in blood and urine and reports of the diets of participants. Ultimately they plan to analyze and combine all the data to evaluate the adequacy for good health of the current diet. □

National health: Opinions vary

The majority of the American public favors a national health insurance plan, according to a recently released report from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. But a significant percentage, particularly from the Midwest and South, opposes such a plan. No majority opinions exist, however, about what changes are needed in health services, benefit programs and reimbursement mechanisms: The opinions are as many as the more than 8,600 oral and written comments gathered for the report.

The comments were solicited by mail and at public hearings from health care providers, insurers, government officials, consumers and special interest and minority groups in every state during October 1977. HEW Secretary Joseph A. Califano Jr. said the results, compiled in "National Health Insurance — A National Outreach Report," will be "of tremendous value" in developing a statement of principles for national health insurance, which President Carter plans to present in March 1978. In six to seven months, the report, with results of other studies, will form the basis for a HEW-sponsored bill to be presented to Congress, a spokesman said.

Out of the confusion of opinions, HEW has gleaned four areas of consensus. According to the American public, a NHI program should: Stress preventive care and health education efforts; be preceded by a cost containment mechanism and develop means to cope with current and anticipated cost pressures; build on the strengths of the existing system, and use the lessons of other countries with similar plans. □

Alcoholics unaffected by Rand report

A year and a half ago, the Rand Corporation quietly reported that it was possible for recovered alcoholics to resume moderate drinking without relapse. Almost instantly, Rand found itself in heated conflict with adherents of the long-held belief — subscribed to almost spiritually by Alcoholics Anonymous devotees — that total abstinence is the only way to avoid alcoholism again. And many of Rand's critics fearfully predicted that the report would spur recovered alcoholics to drinking and ultimate self-destruction.

Now, a study of 244 patients at six alcoholism treatment centers and residences in the Boston area concludes that the Rand report has had almost no effect on recovering alcoholics. "Our findings suggest that the Rand report may have influenced the drinking behavior of only a

Sex and height	Age group in years					
	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74
Men						
Weight in pounds						
62 inches-----	130	141	143	147	143	143
63 inches-----	135	145	148	152	147	147
64 inches-----	140	150	153	156	153	151
65 inches-----	145	156	158	160	158	156
66 inches-----	150	160	163	164	163	160
67 inches-----	154	165	169	169	168	164
68 inches-----	159	170	174	173	173	169
69 inches-----	164	174	179	177	178	173
70 inches-----	168	179	184	182	183	177
71 inches-----	173	184	190	187	189	182
72 inches-----	178	189	194	191	193	186
73 inches-----	183	194	200	196	197	190
74 inches-----	188	199	205	200	203	194
Women						
57 inches-----	114	118	125	129	132	130
58 inches-----	117	121	129	133	136	134
59 inches-----	120	125	133	136	140	137
60 inches-----	123	128	137	140	143	140
61 inches-----	126	132	141	143	147	144
62 inches-----	129	136	144	147	150	147
63 inches-----	132	139	148	150	153	151
64 inches-----	135	142	152	154	157	154
65 inches-----	138	146	156	158	160	158
66 inches-----	141	150	159	161	164	161
67 inches-----	144	153	163	165	167	165
68 inches-----	147	157	167	168	171	169

The averages: "... not presumed to indicate 'ideal' or 'desirable' weight."

National Center for Health Statistics