



## Calculating costs of obesity isn't easy

**A recent study claimed that preventing obesity doesn't reduce health costs, but others disputed the findings. What's the real story?**

That study got a lot of headlines, and its findings were controversial on several points. But first, let's make clear what the study actually found.

Some people mistakenly believe the research said obesity (and smoking, which was also studied) don't increase an individual's health care costs. Not so: The researchers found health costs higher for obese people and smokers between the ages of 20 and 56. However, those people tend to die earlier. Normal-weight people who don't smoke, on the other hand, tend to live longer, thus incurring more medical bills over the years.

Even if this analysis proves true, most people do what they can to live longer, even if it means higher costs over the years. In fact, the researchers themselves said their findings shouldn't be used as an argument to stop programs to combat obesity and smoking, saying there are other payoffs to do so.

But most experts who commented on the study disputed the findings anyway. Several other recent studies have found exactly the opposite — that obesity and smoking lead to illnesses that cost both individuals and society more over the long run. Both the Rand Corporation and the University of Florida recently published studies that showed the lifetime health care

costs of normal weight adults are 20 to 40 percent lower than obese adults who have health problems resulting from their weight. The lower costs occur even though healthier, normal weight adults live longer than obese adults who have multiple weight-related health conditions.

In addition, other researchers have found other costs related to obesity. In just one example published in January in the *Annals of Epidemiology*, researchers found that Shell Oil employees who were obese were 80 percent more likely to be absent from work, and were absent nearly four more days per year (7.7 days compared to 4.0 days) than their normal-weight co-workers. Even healthy overweight and obese employees — those with no other health conditions — were absent from work more often than employees who had a normal weight. The researchers said the direct costs to the company resulting from days lost work due to overweight or obesity was nearly \$1.9 million.

Economics aside, the cost of obesity runs high in American life. The percentage of U.S. adults who are overweight or obese has increased from 15 percent in the late 1970s to 33 percent today. Losing weight isn't easy, but a diet high in fruits and vegetables, whole grain and fiber, lean protein and low-fat dairy is a good start.

*Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1044, or [filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu](mailto:filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu).*



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY  
OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY  
EXTENSION

OHIO AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH  
AND DEVELOPMENT CENTER

---

**For the week of  
Feb. 24, 2008**

---

**By Martha Filipic**  
(614) 292-9833  
[filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu](mailto:filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu)

**Editor:**  
This column was reviewed by Gail Kaye, state specialist in human nutrition for Ohio State University Extension and dietetic internship program director for the Department of Human Nutrition in the College of Education and Human Ecology

To receive Chow Line by e-mail, send a message to [filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu](mailto:filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu) or sign up at <http://www.ag.ohio-state.edu/~news/subscribe.php>.

---

**Section of Communications  
and Technology  
News and Media Relations**  
2021 Coffey Road  
Columbus, OH 43210-1044  
(614) 292-2011

208 Research Services  
Building  
1680 Madison Ave.  
Wooster, OH 44691-4096  
(330) 263-3780

Ohio State University Extension embraces human diversity and is committed to ensuring that all research and related educational programs are available to clientele on a nondiscriminatory basis without regard to race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability, or veteran status. This statement is in accordance with United States Civil Rights Laws and the USDA. *Keith L. Smith, Ph.D., Associate Vice President for Agricultural Administration and Director, Ohio State University Extension*  
TDD No. 800-589-8292 (Ohio only) or 614-292-1868