Obesity: Role of Health Behavior

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Abstract

According to the American Obesity Association, "Obesity is a complex, multi-factorial chronic disease involving environmental (social and cultural), genetic, physiologic, metabolic, behavioral and psychological components." Prevalence of obesity and overweight has been increasing dramatically in the U.S. The National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK, 2000) reported that nearly one-fourth of the adults in US are obese. Presence of obesity has been associated with various physical and psychological disorders. Wellman and Friedberg (2002) reported that there is an association between obesity and type 2 diabetes mellitus, heart disease, hypertension, stroke, and certain types of cancer. Himes (2000) found that obesity is positively associated with limitations in activities of daily life (ADLs) for women.

The epidemic of obesity has burdened the health care system in the U.S. The direct and indirect costs attributed to overweight and obesity are significant. The economic and social impacts of obesity have drawn attention of researchers as well as the policy efforts. Researchers have widely explored the causes and consequences of obesity. However, little effort has been made to understand the factors or behaviors associated with the likelihood of being obese, especially using national database. In order to frame relevant policies, it is pertinent to have a complete understanding of the problem and see if it is more of a personal or a public issue or a mix of both.

This study uses the 1994 – 1996 Continuing Survey of Food Intake by Individuals and the companion Diet and Health Knowledge Survey to compare and contrast the characteristics, i.e., health status, health production factors, health behavior, health knowledge, food attribute preferences and demographic characteristics, of the obese, overweight and the normal weight individuals. The dependent variable used in this study is a dummy coded polychotomous variable indicating whether a person is obese, overweight or normal weight. Since the response variable is ordered, ordered logit analysis was used to estimate the probabilities.

In the sample, nearly 21% of the respondents are obese, about 37% are overweight and the rest (42%) are normal weight. The results indicate that those individuals, who do not perceive their health to be excellent, have more number of chronic illnesses, those who are full time employed, those who do not exercise, watch TV for more than 5 hours in two days, do not place importance on body weight, and receive food stamps are more likely to be obese then the comparison groups. Those who do not smoke or consume alcohol are also more likely to be obese. The older individuals are less likely to be obese. Education also has a significant effect on the likelihood of being obese, with the higher educated people being less likely to be obese. Males and blacks are more likely to be obese and overweight.

Based on the findings, various implications for the community and policy efforts to curb the epidemic of obesity can be drawn. The employers should provide cafeterias with healthy food choices and an opportunity for the employees to be physically active. According to The Surgeon General's Report, 40 percent of the US adults do not participate in any active physical activity. Increased TV watching hours is significantly associated with obesity. Various community programs aimed at including the adults in active leisure might aid in reducing TV watching hours. The significant impact of health behavior variables on obesity and over weight indicates that a change in behavior of the individuals could be of help in controlling the spread of obesity. Behavior change takes place gradually through learning. Many schools have reduced their time allocated for physical activities. There should be more emphasis on physical education in schools. Food stamps recipients are more likely to be obese. This indicates that the nutrition education component of the program is ineffective and needs to be evaluated and reformed.

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