

Obese preschoolers' healthcare costs nearly 60% more than healthy-weight children

Date

July 6, 2016



Preschoolers who are obese are two to three times more likely to end up in hospital than children who are a healthy weight or overweight, a study by Sydney University has found. *Photo: iStock*

Obese preschoolers are two to three times more likely to end up sick and in hospital than other children their age, a new Australian study says.

Obese children also accounted for health costs that were 60 per cent higher than other children their age, said the study, which was published in the journal *Obesity* on Wednesday.

About one-quarter of Australian children aged two to five are overweight and one in 20 is obese.

The study, by the University of Sydney's School of Public Health, is the first to show the higher direct healthcare costs of obesity in preschool-aged children compared with those of healthy weight.

Advertisement

It tracked the health costs of 350 children aged two to five over three years. These included the costs of tests, medicine, visits to see doctors and specialists, and stints in hospital and emergency rooms.

Obese children were much more likely than other children to be admitted to hospital for respiratory disorders and diseases of the ear, nose, mouth and throat.

Children with a healthy weight used about \$2516 in health services over the period of the study compared with about \$4124 among obese children.

Early intervention to reduce obesity in children could save Australian taxpayers as much as \$17.5 million a year, said lead author Alison Hayes, an associate professor of health economics at the University of Sydney.

But the research found little difference in costs between healthy children and those who were overweight, as opposed to obese, she said.

To determine whether a child was obese, the researchers used the BMI Z-score scale, [the measure used by the World Health Organisation](#).

Costs and visits to hospitals and emergency rooms increased dramatically for obese preschoolers, similar to the trend seen among obese adults.

"Children who are obese in early childhood are more likely to be obese in later childhood, adolescence and adulthood," Professor Hayes said.

That could lead to serious chronic diseases that have a huge impact on our healthcare system.

[A study published in medical journal *The Lancet*](#), earlier this year found the number of obese people worldwide had blown out from 105 million in 1975 to 641 million in 2014.

It said that nearly 13 per cent of the global population was now obese, compared with just over 9 per cent who were underweight.

Early prevention of obesity would improve children's health, and result in immediate savings in healthcare costs.

"Childhood obesity is a serious public health issue, and is becoming an increasing problem in children under five years old," Professor Hayes said.

"In addition to the health impacts of childhood obesity, there are major economic impacts, which may occur earlier than previously thought.

"Worldwide, 6.9 per cent of children under five are overweight or obese, but in countries such as Australia, US and UK, the figure may be as high as 23 per cent."

In addition to the health costs, there is also the loss of productivity when parents take time off work to care for their children.

To see an example of the BMI Z-score for children, which is different from the body mass index used for adults, visit the [Children's Research Centre at Baylor College of Medicine](#).

Recommended

