

Stay thin to age in good health

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An important study shows that people who accumulate significant excess weight between the ages of 20 and 55 are at greater risk of developing several chronic diseases later in life and of dying prematurely.



Obesity has become one of the principal problems in public health worldwide. In 2015, no less than 107.7 million children and 603.7 million adults were obese and this excess weight was itself responsible for 4 million deaths¹.

DETERIORATION OF HEALTH

The importance of this problem is particularly well illustrated by the results of an American study recently published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*². By analyzing the changes in body weights for 118,140 men and women from the age of 20 to 55, the authors noted that 23% of the women and 13% of the men had gained 20 kg or more over this period. In these people, the excessive weight gain was associated with a significant increase in risk for several diseases in the following years (type 2 diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, severe osteoarthritis, and cataracts) as well as an increased risk of premature death.

The excessive weight gain is also associated with a serious deterioration in quality of life, whether measured by the appearance of multiple chronic diseases, degraded cognitive functions or increased physical limitations. The risk of developing these health problems is even observed for much smaller weight gains, e.g. gaining as little as 5 kg as an adult entails health risks.

OBESE AND SICK

These results show once more how excessive accumulation of weight is an abnormal physiological state, with disastrous consequences for health. At the beginning of adult age, these problems are not yet evident and young obese individuals often consider themselves to be in good health and show no interest in modifying their lifestyle. It is, however, important to realize that in the long run, despite what one sometimes reads, one cannot be both obese and in good health because the disequilibrium caused by excess adipose tissue strongly accelerates the development of a collection of chronic diseases and thus diminishes the quality and length of life.

Supplementary kilos



In adults, excess body weight generally begins during one's twenties, with increases of about 0.5 to 1 kg per year. Between the ages of 20 and 50, it is thus common for a person to gain 10 to 20 kg (and even more), and this excess weight can lead to obesity. For example, a man of 1.80 m height who goes from 80 to 100 kg during his adult life sees his body mass index (BMI) rise from 25 to 31, which corresponds to the BMI of an obese person according to the criteria of the World Health Organization.

CURRENT PHENOMENON

There is also, unfortunately, a separate complication at present: according to studies performed in the United States, the prevalence of obesity in children ranges from 9% in children between 2 and 5 years, to 20% in those between ages 12 and 19 and shoots up to 34% in those between 20 and 34 years of age. One often hears (with reason) about the importance of diminishing obesity in children, but the high proportion of young adults who are overweight also represents a serious public health problem because these individuals are at a very high risk of developing a host of chronic diseases later in life.

Gaining as little as 5 kg during adult life is associated with increases of:

- 31% in the risk of type 2 diabetes
- 14% in the risk of hypertension
- 8% in the risk of cardiovascular diseases
- 6% in the risk of cancers caused by excess weight
- 5% in the risk of premature death.

⁽¹⁾ Global Burden of Diseases 2015 Obesity Collaborators. Health effects of overweight and obesity in 195 countries over 25 years. *N. Engl. J. Med.* 2017;377:13-27.

⁽²⁾ Zhen Y et al. Associations of weight gain from early to middle adulthood with major health outcomes later in life. *JAMA* 2017;318:255-269.