

Running the Numbers

*A Periodic Feature to Inform North Carolina Healthcare Professionals
About Current Topics in Health Statistics*

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Obesity and Overweight Among Adults in North Carolina

Obesity is a serious and increasing health problem in North Carolina and the United States. Obesity and overweight substantially increase the risk of a number of chronic diseases, including hypertension, diabetes, some types of cancer, and heart disease.

We are able to measure the prevalence of obesity and overweight among adults in North Carolina through the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). The BRFSS is an ongoing random telephone survey of health conditions and risk factors among noninstitutionalized persons age 18 and older. It is sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and is conducted in all US states. During 2001, approximately 6,000 surveys were completed in North Carolina. Adults are asked to report their weight and height, from which a Body Mass Index (BMI) is calculated (kg/m^2). Underweight is defined by CDC as a BMI less than 18.5, recommended weight is a BMI of 18.5 to 24.9, overweight is a BMI of 25.0 to 29.9, and obese is a BMI greater than 29.9. A male who is 6 feet tall would be obese if he weighed 221 pounds or more.

According to the 2001 BRFSS data, 2.1% of North Carolina adults were underweight, 39.1% were within the recommended weight, 35.9% were overweight, and 22.9% were obese. The level of obesity in North Carolina is substantially higher than the *Healthy People 2010* goal, which is 16.8%. A slightly higher percentage of North Carolina adults are overweight or obese, compared to the nation as a whole. The percentage of adults in North Carolina who were overweight or obese increased from 46.4% in 1990 to 58.8% in 2001. During this same time period the percentage who were obese nearly doubled, from 12.9% to 22.9%.

Certain demographic groups in North Carolina had a higher prevalence in 2001 of being overweight or obese: males compared to females (68% vs. 50%), blacks compared to whites (69% vs. 57%), and persons aged 55-64 compared to those aged 18-24 (68% vs. 41%). There were relatively small differences by education and household income. The difference by gender is due entirely to a much higher percentage overweight among males; the percentage obese is about 23% for both males and females. The difference by race is due entirely to a much higher prevalence of obesity among blacks; the percentage overweight is about 35% for both whites and blacks. The highest prevalence of obesity was among black women at 40.2%.

Overweight and obesity are associated with other risk factors that are measured in the BRFSS. In 2001, 26% of adult respondents reported through the BRFSS that they did not engage in any leisure-time physical activity in the past month. When responses on the intensity, duration, and frequency of exercise are considered, 58% of North Carolina adults did not meet the recommended level of physical activity (moderate physical activity for 30 or more minutes per day for five or more days per week, or vigorous physical activity for 20 or more minutes per day for three or more days per week). Only 25% of adult respondents reported that they consumed the recommended five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day.

A high percentage of North Carolina adults are not at a healthy weight and this percentage has increased 27% over the past decade. The percentage of adults who were obese increased 78%. There is an urgent need to address this growing health problem in North Carolina.

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