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5 Volume

1 Issue

January 11

2005

## The High Correlation Between Obesity, Illness and Poor Health

As attention is increasingly focused on “the obesity epidemic,” a survey by Harris Interactive finds that adults who have been diagnosed as “obese” are much more likely to suffer from a broad range of diseases than the general population.

These data are based on a nationwide sample of 12,370 U.S. adults aged 18 and over who were surveyed online between June 10 and 22, 2004. The purpose of the survey was to investigate chronic illness and health care management among the U.S. population.

While available estimates relating to the size of the obese adult population in the U.S. range from between 20 to 30 percent, the Harris Interactive 10,000 Patients study found that 15 percent of adults have been **diagnosed** as obese. Other estimates likely include those who are undiagnosed.

Those adults diagnosed as obese report substantially worse health status. They have been diagnosed with many more diseases and have experienced a much higher rate of hospitalization than the U.S. adult population as a whole. It should be noted that, of course, the general population includes the 15 percent diagnosed as obese. If they were compared only with the 85 percent of the population who have not been diagnosed as obese, the differences would be even larger.

### Health Status

In contrasting the health status of the obese and the general population, people diagnosed as obese are far less likely to report their health as excellent than are all adults (2% vs. 10%). They are also much less likely to say their health is very good (16% vs. 31%). Overall, therefore, only 17 percent of people diagnosed as obese say their health is excellent or very good, compared to 41 percent of all adults. Conversely, obese adults are more than twice as likely as the general population to say that their health is only fair or poor (39% vs. 18%). Indeed, they are three and a half times more likely to claim poor health (7% vs. 2%).

**TABLE 1**

**Health Status**

“In general, how would you describe your own health?”

Base: All Adults

	Obesity Diagnosed	General Population	Prevalence Ratio (Obese divided by general population)
Unweighted base	1,715	12,370	
	%	%	
Excellent	2	10	
Very good	16	31	
Good	43	41	
Fair	32	16	
Poor	7	2	
Excellent/Very good	17	41	0.4
Fair/Poor	39	18	2.1

NOTE: When two percentages are added (excellent/very good or fair/poor) they may differ from sum of numbers above because of rounding.

**Co-morbidities**

The survey provides a detailed disease profile of the adults who have been diagnosed as obese. They are clearly much more likely than the general adult population to suffer from a broad range of diseases. Those diagnosed with obesity are:

- 2.9 times more likely to have been diagnosed as **diabetics** (26% vs. 9%).
- 2.6 times more likely to have been diagnosed as having a **sleep disorder** (21% vs. 8%).
- Twice as likely to have been diagnosed as suffering from **depression** (32% vs. 16%).
- Twice as likely to have been diagnosed as suffering from **back problems** (26% vs. 13%).
- Twice as likely to have been diagnosed with **anxiety disorder** (20% vs. 10%).
- 1.9 times more likely to have been diagnosed as **hypertensives** (41% vs. 22%).
- 1.8 times more likely to have been diagnosed with **digestive disorder** (18% vs. 10%).
- 1.7 times more likely to have been diagnosed as having **arthritis** (40% vs. 23%).
- 1.7 times more likely to have been diagnosed as having **high cholesterol** (38% vs. 22%).
- 1.7 times more likely to have been diagnosed with **migraine** (20% vs. 12%).
- 1.3 times more likely to have been diagnosed with **allergies** (48% vs. 37%).

Overall, adults diagnosed as obese report that they have been diagnosed with an average of 6.4 chronic conditions, compared to an average of 3.1 conditions for those among the general adult population.

**TABLE 2**

**Co-Morbidities**

“Please indicate if you have ever been told by a doctor or another health professional that you have the following medical conditions.”

Base: All Adults

	<b>Obesity Diagnosed %</b>	<b>General Population %</b>	<b>Prevalence Ratio (Obese divided by general population)</b>
Diabetes	26	9	2.9
Sleep disorder	21	8	2.6
Depression	32	16	2.0
Back problems	26	13	2.0
Anxiety disorder	20	10	2.0
Hypertension	41	22	1.9
Digestive disorder	18	10	1.8
Arthritis	40	23	1.7
Cholesterol	38	22	1.7
Migraine	20	12	1.7
Allergies	48	37	1.3
<b>Mean number of co-morbidities</b>	<b>6.4</b>	<b>3.1</b>	<b>2.1</b>

**Hospitalization**

Unsurprisingly, given the widespread prevalence of many serious medical conditions among obese people, they tend to be hospitalized much more often than the general population. Fully 19 percent of those diagnosed as obese were hospitalized in the previous 12 months compared to 13 percent of adults overall.

Furthermore, adults diagnosed as obese are almost twice as likely as adults in the general population to have been hospitalized two or more times in the last 12 months (7% vs. 4%).

**TABLE 3**

**Hospitalization In Last 12 Months**

“In the past 12 months, how many times have you been hospitalized?”

Base: All Adults

	<b>Obesity Diagnosed %</b>	<b>General Population %</b>	<b>Prevalence Ratio (Obese divided by general population)</b>
Once only	12	9	1.3
Two or more times	7	4	1.7
<b>Hospitalized one or more times</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>1.5</b>

## So what?

It is always dangerous to assume causality from correlations, but in this case it is a reasonable assumption that most of the large differences in health status and disease prevalence reported above are a result of obesity.

Given the widespread prevalence of obesity (the 15 percent of all adults represent over 30 million adults diagnosed with obesity); these data are obviously very alarming. They are of even more concern because the proportion of the public which is obese has been rising rapidly over the last two decades, and there is no good reason to believe that this growth will not continue.

It is therefore a reasonable assumption that we can expect many more people will suffer from diabetes, depression, hypertension, arthritis and the other diseases listed in Table 2. This is very bad news indeed.

A downloadable PDF of the Harris Interactive Health Care News will soon be available at [http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/newsletters\\_healthcare.asp](http://www.harrisinteractive.com/news/newsletters_healthcare.asp).

## Methodology

This survey was conducted online in the U.S. between June 10 and June 22, 2004 among a nationwide cross section of 12,370 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, income and region were weighted where necessary to align with population proportions. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

In theory, with probability samples of this size, one could say with 95 percent certainty that the results have a sampling error of plus or minus 1 percentage point for the overall sample. Unfortunately, there are several other possible sources of error in all polls or surveys that are probably more serious than theoretical calculations of sampling error. They include refusals to be interviewed (nonresponse), question wording and question order, interviewer bias, weighting by demographic control data and screening (e.g., for likely voters). It is impossible to quantify the errors that may result from these factors. This online sample was not a probability sample.

*These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls.*

## About the Survey

Harris Interactive *10,000 Patients*<sup>SM</sup> is a large-scale online study of healthcare practices and experiences across more than 50 different chronic conditions, and explores the chronically ill's current illness management practices, latest trends and current issues in health care, including compliance and persistence, the increasing costs of health care, Rx to OTC switching, DTC advertising, online resources for health management and drug re-importation.

In addition to in-depth analysis of the obese, reports are available on a range of other chronic health conditions. For more information on these reports, call 877.919.4765 or go to [www.harrisinteractive.com/10000](http://www.harrisinteractive.com/10000).

# Health Care News

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## About Harris Interactive

**Harris Interactive Inc.** ([www.harrisinteractive.com](http://www.harrisinteractive.com)), the 15th largest and fastest-growing market research firm in the world, is a Rochester, N.Y.-based global research company that blends premier strategic consulting with innovative and efficient methods of investigation, analysis and application. Known for *The Harris Poll*<sup>®</sup> and for pioneering Internet-based research methods, Harris Interactive conducts proprietary and public research to help its clients achieve clear, material and enduring results.

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To become a member of the Harris Poll Online<sup>SM</sup> and be invited to participate in future online surveys, visit [www.harrispollonline.com](http://www.harrispollonline.com).

For more information, please  
contact us at:

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