



Obesity: A public health imperative exacerbated by COVID-19

WHAT IS OBESITY?

Obesity is a complex, chronic, relapsing disease where excess body fat leads to physiological impairments. The disease of obesity increases the risk of developing other chronic diseases and is associated with early mortality and reduced quality of life.

MAINE BY THE NUMBERS

- **Adult** obesity rates have nearly tripled since 1990. Data from 2019 show **31.7%** of adults have obesity.
- **Youth** obesity rates in Maine lack standardization across age groups, but data from 2017-18 show **14.9%** of children aged 10-17 have obesity.
- Estimated **annual costs** related to obesity in Maine were **\$767 million** (2009 dollars); 37% was financed by Medicare and Medicaid.

COVID-19 & OBESITY

- Having obesity increases the risk of **hospitalization** due to a COVID-19 infection, and the risk of **death** from COVID-19 increases with obesity severity.
- Obesity is linked to impaired **immune function** as well as **decreased lung capacity and reserve** that can make ventilation more difficult.
- Quarantine disrupts **daily habits** in ways that impact health, including increased screen time, decreased physical activity, and sleep disruption.
- Pandemic-related **stress** may worsen depression, mental health, and obesity.
- **Income loss, altered shopping behaviors, and transportation barriers** due to COVID-19 all make accessing nutritious food more difficult.
- In Maine, **food insecurity** related to the pandemic is projected to have increased by 25% for adults and 32% for children from 2018, impacting approximately 216,000 adults and 63,000 children in 2020.

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CAUSES OF OBESITY

Obesity is a multi-causal, complex chronic disease, whose burden is inequitably distributed by race and ethnicity, income, and geography. Many of the factors most strongly associated with weight are influenced by public health systems.

- **Diet Quality:** Foods and beverages high in calories but low in nutrients such as fiber, protein, and vitamins and minerals
- **Childhood Food Environment:** The quality and availability of foods, beverages and nutrition education in early child care and school settings
- **Built Environment:** Lack of robust, multi-user transportation infrastructure, safe and clean green space, and inequitable availability of healthy food retail outlets
- **Psychosocial Factors:** Weight stigma and bias, both intra- and interpersonal, childhood adversity, and chronic stress are all independent risk factors for obesity; they are also linked with coping strategies, such as sedentary behavior and poor diet quality
- **Access to Healthcare:** Health insurance provision and quality, including coverage of mental health and nutrition services, and training of health care providers to treat people with obesity and to prevent its development among patients with overweight
- **Biological Factors:** Emerging data in the field of epigenetics, which investigates environmental impacts on our gene expression, has found associations with obesity including maternal health while pregnant and subsequent risk for obesity among infants, and toxic environmental exposures, including PFAS

STATE-LEVEL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Support consistent funding for obesity prevention and management, building on existing efforts: SNAP-Ed, *Let's Go!*, State Nutrition Action Council, WIC & Head Start.
- Improve monitoring of obesity prevalence and obesity-related chronic diseases among youth and adults. Collect, analyze, and report data disaggregated by age (particularly for youth), race, ethnicity, gender, disability, geography, and other demographic factors.
- Increase accessibility of electronic health record data on obesity.
- Improve evaluation of obesity-related community programming and outcomes, including assessing the cumulative effect of federal, state, and private funding.
- Engage local governments, decision-makers, and stakeholders in obesity prevention efforts. Community-led priority areas should drive equitable resource allocation.

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The **Maine Public Health Association** is the state's oldest, largest, and most diverse association for public health professionals. As a statewide nonprofit, we advocate, act, and advise on critical public health challenges, aiming to improve the policies, systems, and environments that underlie health inequities – but which also have potential to improve health outcomes for all people in Maine. Learn more at: www.mainepublichealth.org.