

Study: 18% of premature deaths linked to obesity

By Melissa Healy, Los Angeles Times

The death toll of the nation's obesity epidemic may be close to four times higher than has been widely believed, and all that excess weight could reverse the steady trend of lengthening life spans for a generation of younger Americans, new research warns.

More than 18 percent of premature deaths in the United States between 1986 and 2006 were associated with excess body mass, according to a team of sociologists led by a Columbia University demographer. That estimate, published online Thursday in the American Journal of Public Health, is far higher than the 5 percent toll widely cited by researchers.

The new figures do not reflect newly discovered facts about obesity's effects on health. Rather, they emerged after the researchers applied a finer-grained approach to examining obesity across the U.S. population.

Using historical survey data, the study authors toted up differences in excess weight status across different gender, ethnic and age groups. They combined that data with existing "mortality risk" statistics to estimate how many Americans over age 40 who died during that 20-year period did so because of weight-related causes.

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