



Overweight and Obesity Rates in Europe

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It is estimated that the number people with obesity in Europe has increased threefold since the 1980's, also in countries with traditionally low prevalence. At the same time we live longer than ever. And with age the risk of developing overweight increases. So, are Europeans really gaining weight? Or are we just getting older? How big is the overweight problem really? The World Health Organization has found out.

Achieving comparable, age-adjusted data

Comparing studies on the prevalence of obesity is notoriously difficult due to variations in methodology and population, as well as potential confounding factors. One such factor to take into account for a more accurate picture of the magnitude of the overweight and obesity problem and its development, is that populations are growing older. Europeans live longer and birth rates are low. Overweight and obesity are most common in older adults and hence a higher number of older adults implies more individuals affected by overweight and obesity in the population.

Several organisations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Obesity Taskforce (IOTF) and Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, hold databases on overweight and obesity in European countries. However, no conclusions based on the totality of these data have been drawn previously, mainly due to limited comparability. But recently WHO Europe has compiled and standardised, by age, data available from these and other organisations, as well as scientific publications. This has resulted in a map of obesity trends from 1981-2005 in adults aged 25-64 years in the 53 countries of the WHO European Region.¹ Self-reported and measured data were analysed separately to avoid erroneous conclusions.

Common patterns

The analysis of measured data reveals some patterns across the WHO European Region. In all countries, for men and women, higher prevalence of overweight (Body Mass Index (BMI) ≥ 25) and obesity (BMI ≥ 30) was demonstrated among older people (50–64 years) than in the younger age group (25–49 years). Overweight was shown to be more common in men than women, while obesity was more common in women across Europe. Exceptions occurred in Ireland and the UK, where obesity was more common in men in some surveys.

Prevalence and time trends across Europe

The highest rate of overweight in men was reported from the UK, where more than 70% were overweight in the early 2000's. The highest obesity rates were also reported from the UK, where 1 in 4 men was affected. Similar obesity rates were seen in Irish women, who demonstrated the highest rates in Europe. Overweight was most common in British women of which nearly 60% had a BMI ≥ 25 . Populations in Eastern European countries, Balkan and former Soviet republics were in general leaner than the Western Europeans, with overweight rates as low as 40% and obesity affecting less than 10%.

The development over time shows an increase in both overweight and obesity in all countries for both men and women. Interestingly, in Irish men the rise in obesity was greater than for overweight, while in other countries the trends are equal. In Irish women, the overall trend for obesity was increasing, but was actually decreasing among the older (50–64 years) women, the only group for which a negative trend was reported.

More self-reported than measured data were available. Self-reported data showed that obesity rates in most countries ranged from 10–14.9% in 2001–2005, followed by 15–19.9%. The number of countries with obesity rates higher than 20% was greater than those with less than 10% obesity. Self reported data on overweight in men ranged from around 50% in Switzerland and Latvia to nearly 70% in Slovakia and Malta. The lowest obesity prevalence was reported from Switzerland and Italy, the highest in Greece and Malta where more than 1 in 4 men were affected by obesity. Switzerland and Italy had the lowest proportion of women with overweight, Greece and the UK the highest. Obesity prevalence in women was lowest in Switzerland and Sweden, highest in Greece, Malta and Latvia.

On a global level the obesity prevalence in adults is 7.7% in men and 9.8% in women. Particularly affected are a number of populations in the WHO Western Pacific Region, the West Indies, the United States of America and Australia.²

Conclusions

Age-standardised overweight and obesity prevalence has increased over time in most European countries. This means that the increasing number of Europeans with excess weight is not only a consequence of a greater number of elderly, who are more prone to having overweight than younger people, but that the population in general has become more affected by overweight.

Further information

WHO Europe, Obesity section -

<http://www.euro.who.int/en/what-we-do/health-topics/diseases-and-conditions/obesity>

References

1. Doak CM, et al. (2012). Age standardization in mapping adult overweight and obesity trends in the WHO European Region. *Obes Rev* 13(2):174-191. doi: [10.1111/j.1467-789X.2011.00943.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-789X.2011.00943.x). Epub 2011 Nov 7.
2. [WHO Global Infobase](#).