

HIGHLIGHTS  
FROM THE  
COMMUNITY  
HEALTH  
DATA BASE

2002

Southeastern Pennsylvania  
Household Health Survey

PHMC's 2002 Southeastern Pennsylvania Household Health Survey is under construction.

For more information on the survey, please contact **Siobhan Hawthorne** at (215) 985-2527 or [siobhan@phmc.org](mailto:siobhan@phmc.org).

## THE OBESITY EPIDEMIC IN SOUTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA

Obesity<sup>1</sup> is considered a chronic, metabolic disease caused by multiple and complex inherited and acquired factors, including excessive calorie intake, decreased physical activity, and genetic influences. Obesity affects at least 39 million Americans, including more than one-quarter of all adults and about one in five children. The number of obese Americans has consistently increased in the United States since 1960. The outgoing Surgeon General, David Satcher, M.D., expressed concern about the alarming rates of obesity in the United States and outlined a strategy to combat it in the recently released report, "The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity." Certain population groups are more at-risk for obesity including children, African-Americans, Latinos and low-income individuals. The impact of obesity on mortality and morbidity is substantial. Obesity increases one's risk of developing life-threatening health conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, gall bladder disease and cancer of the breast, prostate and colon. The adverse health effects of obesity have created enormous added health care costs; each year more than \$100 billion are expended for care for chronic health conditions related to obesity (American Obesity Association, 2001).

This AccessNotes article examines obesity among adults in the region. Data are from PHMC's 2000 Southeastern Pennsylvania Household Health Survey.

In Southeastern Pennsylvania, approximately one in five (20.7%) adults 18 years of age and older are considered obese; this percentage represents 577,000 adults. The percentage of obese adults in Southeastern Pennsylvania is higher than the Healthy People 2010 objective of having no more than 15% being obese. Although obesity is prevalent in all population groups, some population groups are more likely to be obese than are others. (Figure 1)

- Adults ages 40-59 are most likely to be

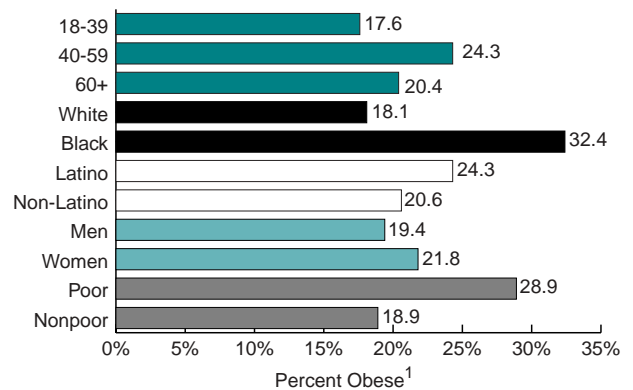
obese (24.3%) compared to adults 60 years of age and older (20.4%) and adults ages 18-39 (17.6%).

- Black adults in Southeastern Pennsylvania are more likely to be obese (32.4%) compared to white adults (18.1%).
- Almost one quarter (24.3%) of Latino adults are obese compared to 20.6% of non-Latino adults.
- Women in Southeastern Pennsylvania are slightly more likely to be obese (21.8%) compared to men (19.4%).
- The poor are more likely to be obese (28.9%) in comparison to the non-poor (18.9%).

Obesity is a known risk factor for numerous chronic and life-threatening health conditions such as high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, and certain types of cancer. Findings from the survey show that obese adults are more likely to have chronic health conditions compared to adults of normal weight.<sup>2</sup> In Southeastern Pennsylvania more than one-third (35.6%) of obese adults have a chronic condition; this percentage represents 204,900 adults. (Figure 2)

- More than two out of five adults who are obese have high blood pressure (41.3%); this represents 238,000 Southeastern Pennsylvania adults.
- Approximately three out of ten obese adults have high cholesterol (30.7% or 176,000 persons).

**Figure 1: Obesity Among Southeastern Pennsylvania Adults by Population Subgroup, 2000**



Source: PHMC's Community Health Data Base, 2000 Southeastern Pennsylvania Household Health Survey

<sup>1</sup> Individuals are considered obese if they have a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 30 or greater. BMI is calculated using the following formula: (weight/2.205)/(total height in inches)<sup>2</sup>.

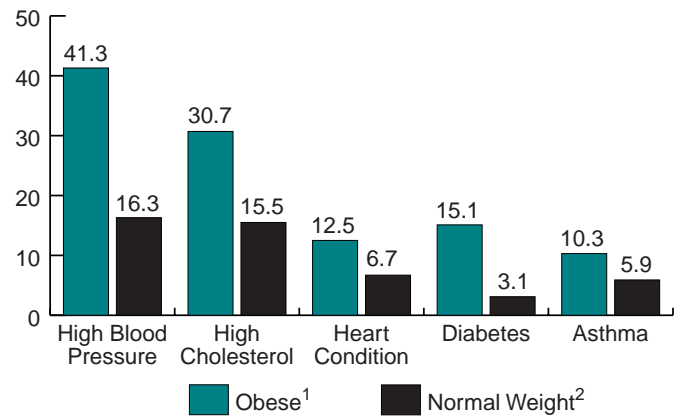
- Obese adults are almost two times as likely to have a heart condition (12.5%) compared to adults who are of normal weight (6.7%).
- Obese adults are five times as likely to be diabetic (15.1%) compared to adults who are of normal weight (3.1%).
- Adults who are obese are almost two times as likely to have asthma (10.3%) compared to adults who are of normal weight (5.9%).

Research has shown that healthful dietary habits, such as decreasing fat intake and increasing the consumption of fruits and vegetables, combined with decreased sedentary behavior and increased physical activity help to achieve and maintain a normal body weight. Weight loss in obese adults has been shown to decrease the many health risks associated with obesity.

- Even though physical activity is believed to be a key factor in weight loss and its maintenance, the majority of obese adults exercise only two days a week or less (60.6%).
- More than half (55.6%) of all obese adults made changes to their diet in the past year. The top three changes made are: eating less fat (31.4%), eating fewer sweets (11.3%) and eating more vegetables (11.3%).

These findings show that a large proportion of adults in Southeastern Pennsylvania, like the United States as a whole, is obese. Obesity is a major public health concern because of the health risks associated with it, such as higher rates of chronic conditions and life-threatening diseases. Through increased physical activity and a more healthful diet, those who are obese can achieve and maintain a more normal weight and, in turn, decrease the health risks associated with obesity. The findings underscore the need to educate the public about obesity and its role in causing illness and unnecessary deaths. It is critical that health providers

**Figure 2: Chronic Conditions Among Obese and Normal Weight Adults in Southeastern Pennsylvania, 2000**



Source: PHMC's Community Health Data Base 2000 Southeastern Pennsylvania Household Health Survey

<sup>1</sup> Individuals are considered obese if they have a Body Mass Index (BMI) of 30 or greater. BMI is calculated using the following formula:  $(\text{weight}/2.205)/(\text{total height in inches})^2$ .

<sup>2</sup> Individuals are considered of normal body weight if they have a Body Mass Index (BMI) between 18.5 and 25. BMI is calculated using the following formula:  $(\text{weight}/2.205)/(\text{total height in inches})^2$ .

encourage efforts to prevent obesity, especially among children. Also, insurers and third-party payers could ultimately reduce costs by providing adequate coverage for obesity treatment and prevention. For more information on obesity in Southeastern Pennsylvania, please contact **Katie Von Badins**, Research Assistant, at (215) 985-2538 or [kathryn@phmc.org](mailto:kathryn@phmc.org) or **Francine Axler**, Senior Research Associate, at (215) 985-2521 or [francine@phmc.org](mailto:francine@phmc.org).

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COMMUNITY HEALTH DATA BASE  
Health Data Resource Center

The HDRC is an information service of PHMC's Community Health Data Base created exclusively to meet the data and research needs of community-based nonprofits in Southeastern Pennsylvania.

**The HDRC has health data and so much more!** Housing statistics, child care issues, mortality, population counts and projections, income level, and many other key statistics are all a part of helping you define what is a healthy community.

**Your Source for Strategic Local Data** — The HDRC provides data for geographic areas as small as a ZIP Code to pinpoint the issues important to your community. Use this information in writing proposals, planning programs, identifying emerging health, social and economic trends, and measuring program outcomes.

**How to Join** — More than 200 of your colleagues in the nonprofit community have already joined the HDRC! Simply call 215-985-6238 and ask for a registration form or visit us online at [www.phmc.org/hdrc](http://www.phmc.org/hdrc).

*The HDRC is funded by the William Penn Foundation. The service is for small and medium-sized, community-based nonprofits ONLY. A small annual fee is required based on the size of the organization's annual budget.*