



For Immediate Release:
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News Release

New Data Shows More Utahns Becoming Obese

(Salt Lake City, UT) – A new report from the Utah Department of Health (UDOH) shows while the percentage of Utah adults who were at unhealthy weight has remained fairly stable over the past decade, at about 58%, there has been a substantial shift in the proportion of Utahns who are obese. Among Utah adults at an unhealthy weight, the percentage who were obese rose from 32.8% in 1999 to a striking 41.7% in 2017. This represents a nearly 30% increase of adults who moved to a higher risk level of unhealthy weight. Utah youth face the same rising proportion of obesity as adults.

“This shift is concerning because as individuals move from being classified as overweight to obese, the potential for health threats such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and even some cancers increases,” said Michael Friedrichs, epidemiologist with the UDOH and author of the study. “Being at an unhealthy weight, whether overweight or obese, increases the risk of poor health outcomes but the risk is intensified for people who are obese.”

In fact, the report showed the risk for heart attack, stroke, and/or angina was nearly 40% higher for adults considered obese compared to adults considered overweight. The prevalence of diabetes was more than two times higher for adults who were obese compared to those who were overweight (14.2% vs. 6.6%). There are also significant economic implications. “As obesity rates climb, so does the cost for medical care. One study showed adults who were obese spent more on direct medical care than did adults at a healthy weight,” said Friedrichs.

Utah adults have one of the lowest rates of obesity in the U.S., at 23.5% and youth have the lowest rate, at 8.7%. Nevertheless, public health officials find these rates unacceptably high.

“We are seeing Utahns, and alarming, more and more of our youth, move into higher risk levels of unhealthy weight,” said Friedrichs. From 1999 to 2017, the proportion of Utah high school aged youth at an unhealthy weight who were obese increased from 38% to 42%. This represents a 12% increase of youth who have moved to a higher risk level of unhealthy weight.

“Preventing this shift from overweight to obesity is a high priority for public health officials,” said Rebecca Fronberg, manager with the UDOH Healthy Living Through Environment, Policy, and Improved Clinical Care (EPICC) Program. “Making the healthy choice the easy choice at childcare, schools, worksites, and communities can encourage Utahns to make healthier nutrition choices and to make regular physical activity a part of their life.”

Public health interventions can play an essential role in providing opportunities for individuals to make the lifestyle changes needed to maintain a healthy weight. For example, staff with the UDOH EPICC Program promote school, family, and community physical activity through Walk and Bike to School Days and Safe Routes to School. Staff also use the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Work@Health® program to help employers create a culture of health by encouraging employees to eat healthy food; move more; and get screenings for weight, blood pressure, and blood sugar. These and other obesity prevention efforts may be found at <http://choosehealth.utah.gov>.

To download a copy of the full report, *The Hidden Epidemic of Obesity: A Closer Look at Unhealthy Weight*, visit, <https://bit.ly/2UZJtkk>.

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The mission of the Utah Department of Health is to protect the public's health through preventing avoidable illness, injury, disability and premature death, assuring access to affordable, quality health care, and promoting healthy lifestyles.