

OBESITY: An underestimated threat

Public perceptions of obesity in Europe

COUNTRY SUMMARY

UNITED KINGDOM

Conducted by independent strategic insight agency Opinium, in collaboration with the European Association for the Study of Obesity (EASO) and with the support of Medtronic

Topline Report:

Views on personal weight

- Over half (52%) of respondents consider their current weight to be a normal / healthy, whilst two in five (38%) would describe themselves to be overweight. Only 5% indicated that they consider their current weight obese
- Many respondents under-estimate their weight category.
 - On in five (21%) of those that consider themselves to be a 'normal / healthy' weight, are in fact overweight (based on a BMI calculated from their self-reported height and weight)
 - Similarly, over a third (36%) of those that consider themselves overweight are in fact obese – again based on a BMI calculated from their self-reported height and weight
- Two in five (41%) are happy with their current weight, whilst over a quarter say they are unhappy with it (30%)
 - Happiness with one's weight is much lower amongst those that consider themselves to be overweight or obese (13% and 5% respectively)
 - It is also higher amongst men than women (45% and 36% respectively)

Weight demographics¹ amongst respondents in the UK

Weight distribution based on respondent BMIs ²	Adult men	Adult women
Underweight	2%	3%
Healthy weight	41%	47%
Overweight	37%	29%
Obese	19%	21%

- Based on BMIs calculated from individuals' self-reported height and weight, 20% of respondents are obese, with a further third (33%) categorised as overweight
 - Although the proportion of obese individuals is relatively consistent between men and women (19% and 21% respectively), more male participants (37%) than female participants (29%) are overweight
 - The proportion of overweight and obese respondents also increases with age (35% of those aged 18-34 compared to 63% of those aged 55+)
 - By region, weight issues (overweight and obesity) are less common in respondents based in the London and the South East (50%) and the East of England (50%) than in many other regions (Wales (60%), Midlands (56%), North East – 55%)

Views on weight in the UK

Average estimated weight distribution for... ²	Adult men	Adult women	Children (under 18)
Underweight	13%	16%	14%
Healthy weight	34%	31%	43%
Overweight	32%	31%	26%
Obese	22%	22%	17%

- The average estimate for the proportion of UK population groups that are obese are: 22% of UK men, 22% of UK women, and 17% of Children (under 18%)
- Almost three quarters (71%) of respondents indicate that they personally know someone that they would consider obese

¹ Respondents were asked to provide their height (in feet and inches) and weight (in stone and pounds), from this BMIs were calculated.

² Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Opinium Research carried out an online survey of 2,000 UK adults aged 18+ from 5th to 16th of December 2014. Results have been weighted to nationally representative criteria on age and gender.

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The causes & effects of obesity

Causes of obesity

- Nine out of ten respondents (92%) agree that 'obesity is caused by lifestyle choices'. Just over a third of respondents agree that it 'is a psychological disorder' (37%). With fewer agreeing that it is a 'genetic disorder' (25%) or a disease (18%)
 - Older respondents (those aged 55+) are less likely than others to agree that 'obesity is a psychological disorder' (32%)
- Of the lifestyle and environmental factors tested, 'poor diet' and 'lack of physical activity' stand out as the factors that the most people think are causes of 'obesity' – 94% and 91% selected these as causes of obesity
- Almost two in five (38%) identify stress as a cause of obesity, whilst only 18% consider lack of sleep as a contributing factor
 - Women are more likely than men to identify stress (43% vs 32%) and lack of sleep (21% vs 15%) as causes of obesity
 - Similarly, younger respondents (aged 18 – 34) are more likely than their older counterparts (aged 55+) to identify stress (43% vs 31%) and lack of sleep (26% vs 10%) as causes
- Almost two thirds (65%) consider a 'poor diet' to be the main contributing lifestyle / environmental factor to an individual developing obesity

Effects of obesity

- Overall, respondents are divided over what causes the greater danger to one's health – 51% think obesity, 49% think smoking.
 - Younger respondents (18-34) however are more likely to think obesity poses a greater danger (56%) than those aged 55+ (48%).
 - Those that consider themselves obese are the group most likely to think smoking poses the greater danger (57%)
- The health threats that the most people associate with obesity are: diabetes (83%), heart disease (81%), High blood pressure (81%), joint and back pain (80%), low confidence and self-esteem (78%), tiredness (69%) and depression (66%)
- However, over half of respondents also associate obesity with strokes (61%), sleep apnoea (55%) and limited opportunities for work/career advancement (51%)
- Just under a third (30%) think cancer is caused by obesity
- Almost two thirds (62%) of respondents consider heart disease to be amongst the biggest obesity related threats to health, wellbeing and lifestyle. This is followed by diabetes (42%) and high blood pressure (24%)
- On average, respondents estimate that obesity typically shortens an individual's life expectancy by 11 years, with 48% thinking it would shorten one's life by ten years or less³
 - Over half (56%) of those that consider themselves obese estimate a decrease in life expectancy of 10 years or less³

Treating obesity

³ Life expectancy figures exclude those that stated that they 'don't know'
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- Opinions are divided over whether obesity requires specialist treatment or not – 43% think it requires specialist treatment, whilst 39% think it can be treated by a GP – the remaining 18% did not know.
- Most respondents agree that diet control (90%) and exercise (89%) are appropriate treatments for obesity either 'every time' or 'almost every time'
- Over half (57%) consider surgery as an appropriate treatment 'occasionally / sometimes' with a further 6% thinking it is appropriate 'almost every time' or every time'. The equivalent figures for the use of medication are 57% and 12%
- Diet control is considered the most effective means to treat morbid obesity by just under half (47%) of respondents. Surgery is considered the most effective treatment method by a quarter (25%) and exercise by 12%

Views on surgery

- Most respondents (87%) are aware of bariatric surgery (either very, moderately or slightly)
 - Overall, the group most aware of obesity are those that consider themselves to be obese (96%)
- Just over one in ten (12%) of those aware of bariatric surgery have a friend / relative who has had bariatric surgery. With only 2% indicating that they themselves have had the surgery
- Almost a third (30%) of respondents who have not had bariatric surgery indicate that they would consider bariatric surgery if they were obese
 - Almost half (49%) of those that think they are obese would consider bariatric surgery
- Almost a third (29%) agree that the country's National Health Service should be required to fund bariatric surgery for those who are obese, but a larger proportion disagree that this should be the case (38%).
 - The likelihood to agree that the National Health Service should fund such surgery is higher for those that consider themselves obese (57%) than those who think they are a healthy weight (25%)
- However, over half (53%) agree that an individual's health insurer should be required to fund such surgery
- Two thirds (68%) agree that the individual concerned should be required to fund the surgery)
 - The likelihood to agree that the individual concerned should fund such surgery is lower for those that consider themselves obese (56%) than those who think they are a healthy weight (73%)
- Three in five (60%) indicate that they would be likely to consider surgical intervention if they were to develop diabetes and they knew the surgery would cure it