

Obesity costs soar tenfold to \$36.5 billion in US

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Americans' losing battle against the bulge also bears a burgeoning price tag, with the amount of money spent treating obesity-related health problems increasing tenfold over 15 years, a study said on Monday.

Between 1987 and 2002, private spending on obesity-linked medical problems mushroomed from \$3.6 billion, or 2 percent of all health spending, to \$36.5 billion or 11.6 percent of spending, the study, published in the journal *Health Affairs*, found.

Obesity is a major risk factor for many chronic illnesses, including diabetes and heart disease. With about 30 percent of U.S. adults now obese, treating these conditions is a leading driver of double-digit health care insurance premium hikes.

"These are very expensive patients," said Ken Thorpe, professor at Emory University's public health school and author of the study. "If insurers and employers are serious about reining in health care spending, then obesity prevention should be at the top of their agenda."

Researchers studied data for about 28,000 privately insured individuals comprising a nationally representative sample.

About 60 million Americans are obese, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And the surge in costs is primarily due to those rising numbers, as opposed to rising treatment costs per patient.

In 2002, obese individuals dominated the category of adults treated for the top 10 medical conditions contributing to medical spending, including arthritis, asthma, back problems, diabetes and heart disease.

These data suggest that health insurers' current cost-cutting strategies, such as boosting co-payments for patients, are aiming at the wrong target. Such measures tinker around the edges of the health cost burden but do not address the problem's roots, Thorpe said.

"We're going to have to tackle this the way we did smoking - with a variety of big strategies," Thorpe said.

With tobacco, that included taxes on cigarettes, an aggressive push for new products like the nicotine patch and a big role for government.