OBESITY

Pediatric overweight and obesity are underdiagnosed

Only 1 in 10 overweight children and adolescents are diagnosed as having weight problems, despite the existence of clear diagnostic criteria. The diagnosis rate for overweight and obesity in this population increased during the past decade, but it has apparently reached a plateau and remains low. “We already knew that pediatric weight problems are increasing in frequency and they are sometimes undiagnosed, but this is the first study to quantify these tendencies on a large scale and to look at the diagnosis rate over time,” said David C Kaelber, the lead investigator.

“When they compared BMI measurements ... with the actual diagnoses ... the authors found that 90% of overweight children ... remained undiagnosed”

As the Medical Director of a pediatric weight-management program in Cleveland, OH, Dr Kaelber saw many children whose weight problems and overweight-related conditions, such as hypertension, had not been diagnosed. These observations and the rising incidence of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents in Western countries led Dr Kaelber and colleagues to perform a retrospective review of weight-problem diagnoses in a hospital system of northeast Ohio.

The researchers analyzed electronic medical records (EMRs) of 60,711 patients aged 2–18 years who attended a well-child clinic at least once between 1999 and 2007. When they compared BMI measurements documented in the EMRs with the actual diagnoses made, the authors found that 90% of overweight children, 46% of obese children and 24% of severely obese children remained undiagnosed. Black and Hispanic patients, older children and girls were most likely to be given a correct diagnosis. A high BMI, frequent visits to the clinic and having another obese individual in the patient's family all increased the chance of a patient's weight status being correctly diagnosed.

These data highlight the need to improve the diagnosis of weight problems in children and adolescents, especially overweight ones, who could benefit most from potential interventions. In addition, this study demonstrates that EMRs can be important tools in clinical research. “The use of EMRs might change the way research can be done—this approach allowed us to look at the data of thousands of patients relatively easily,” said Dr Kaelber.

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