



OBESITY: Is it contagious? A recent study points to that possibility. SPENCER PLATT/GETTY IMAGES

Obesity May Be Socially Contagious

By WAHIBA CHAIR
Special to The Epoch Times

According to the law of attraction, one could argue the social implications of obesity: If you are overweight, you will feel more comfortable among other overweight people, which would result in a trend toward higher weights.

A 32-year medical study of 12,067 people funded by the National Institutes of Health, and published July 26 in the *New England Journal of Medicine* has concluded just that, finding that "closeness of friendship" is relevant to the spread of obesity.

As part of the Framingham Heart Study, initiated in 1971, researchers from Harvard University; the University of California, San Diego; and Mt. Auburn Hospital used longitudinal statistical models to examine several aspects of the spread of obesity.

The study looked at the existence of clusters of obese persons within a network—the social contagiousness of obesity and its dependence on the nature of social ties.

Researchers mapped participants' updated social networks that included friends, siblings, spouses, and neighbors, and made body mass indices available for all subjects.

The findings support a correlation between weight gain and social ties, depending on the nature of the relationship. "In general, the results are not surprising, but the extent of

the influence I think is larger than we might have expected," says Dr. Diane T. Finegood, scientific director of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research's Institute of Nutrition, Metabolism, and Diabetes.

During a study of a two- to four-year period, an obese friend can increase a person's chances of becoming obese by 57 percent, while a sibling comes in second at 40 percent, followed by a spouse at 37 percent.

"What is somewhat surprising is the friendship strength relative to that of a spouse, since that is someone you live with on a daily basis and share more time with, during which you are engaged in food or physical activity related behavior," says Finegood.

Neighbors in the same geographic location do not seem to influence each other. Same-sex relationships had more impact than those of the opposite sex. Same-sex mutual friends—people who mutually listed each other as friends—saw the highest influence.

The study concludes that social distance appears to be more important than geographic distance in terms of spreading obesity, while smoking was not significantly associated with it.

According to co-author Dr. Nicholas Christakis, a professor of medical sociology at Harvard Medical School in Boston, the findings emphasize the epidemiological nature of obesity, which could be useful in reversing a growing trend.

"The results are symmetrical, so that if your social contacts gain weight, you gain weight, and if they lose weight, you lose weight."

This could support the favoring of group public health interventions as more cost-effective and worthwhile than individual ones in terms of weight loss, obesity treatment, and prevention.

Christakis notes that the study does not suggest the social isolation of overweight individuals. "We're not suggesting that people should sever their ties with overweight friends; having friends is healthy for you."

Experts say the study is not conclusive since hidden factors could be to blame. According to Finegood, the study does not tell us whether the formation of new social networks would have the same effect, but it raises the possibility.

Professor Andrew Hill of the University of Leeds says, "The statistics may be meaningful, but in real life this is not very helpful to people who are overweight—it might be very complicated."

Future research plans involve the analysis of the data geared towards other health-related problems such as, drinking and smoking, and their social implications within several degrees of separation.

Reference: The Spread of Obesity in a Large Social Network Over 32 Years, The New England Journal of Medicine, (online): <http://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/full/357/14/1370>.

Are You Damaging Your Liver?

By W. GIFFORD-JONES, M.D.

"What causes liver disease?" Ask anyone this question, and 99 percent will answer, "It's imbibing in too much Cabernet Sauvignon or other alcoholic drinks." But today the liver can be injured by a host of less known, but equally hazardous habits. So how are you being unfriendly to your liver? And what can we learn from the "Mayflower," the ship that carried Pilgrims to this continent in 1620?

The football-sized liver is an amazing organ. Every day it performs hundreds of functions. But today, as never before in history, its most important challenge is changing the toxic substances we ingest into products that can be safely removed from the body. And although the liver has great power to regenerate, never assume it's indestructible.

So what's the problem? Consider the abuse of television on the liver every day. Ads that persuade consumers there's no reason to suffer even minor pain. Tens of thousands of people swallow these pills as if they were M&M candy. But swallowing painkillers, particularly more than the recommended dose of acetaminophen (Tylenol), along with excess alcohol, can cause liver failure and death.

Thousands of cold sufferers are often prescribed antibiotics that have no effect on viral cold infections. Others reach for a variety of cold medications of questionable value. Both place a needless burden on the liver.

Every year I see an increasing number of patients using herbal medicines. But a recent report from The Mayo Clinic cautions that herbal supplements such as kava, comfrey, chaparral, kombucha tea, and skullcap can be toxic to the liver. Remember, it was a natural drug, hemlock, that killed Socrates 2,000 years ago.

Be careful of what gets on your skin. When using an aerosol cleaner, make sure the room is well ventilated, or wear a mask. Use protective measures when spraying to control insects or fungicides. And be certain to use a mask when painting with a spray device.

Don't become a victim to viral infections of the liver that are preventable. Hepatitis A is transmitted by food and drink contaminated by sewage. This can be fatal to elderly people.

Today, large numbers of North Americans are infected with hepatitis B. Spread by sexual contact, saliva, and contaminated needles, it's a serious disease that can result in liver cancer and cirrhosis.

One-third of patients infected with this virus are without symptoms. Others suffer from fever, muscle and joint pain, and jaundice.

What's shocking is that excessive use of alcohol and hepatitis B are not the only ways to develop cirrhosis. A

report from Johns Hopkins claims 25 percent of North Americans suffer from nonalcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD).

It results from not stepping on the bathroom scale to see the pounds mounting up year after year. Patients with NAFLD develop fatty deposits in the liver and elevated liver enzymes, but have no history of excessive consumption of alcohol.

Hopkins researchers claim that 15 percent of NAFLD patients go on to develop nonalcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH), which causes scarring of the liver. Pathologists say these changes are indistinguishable from liver damage caused by too much alcohol. What is even more startling is that NAFLD is now being seen in young obese children. If this isn't a wake-up call, I don't know what is.

I've just completed reading the fascinating book "Mayflower," the history of Pilgrims who landed in Plymouth in 1620. Half of them died within a year from hunger, cold, or infection. But none died from lack of exercise. Today we're dying from obesity, destroying our liver from drugs we often do not need, and from being too lazy to use our legs.

It was also interesting to learn that on the Mayflower voyage it became necessary to ration beer. This lack caused illness among both Pilgrims and sailors, and some died. Beer in 17th-century England was safer than water. [Editor's note: Also, it was not pasteurized, and thus had more vitamins than pasteurized beer.] I'm convinced that in 2007, alcohol in moderation is still safer than most drugs.

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PAIN: Bearing it is easier on the liver than taking pills. PHOTOS.COM

A Little Fish Can Go a Long Way

By DR. JOHN BRIFFA
Special to The Epoch Times

Fish is what you might call a primal food, and therefore it's perhaps not a surprise that its consumption has been associated with broad health benefits. For instance, in a study published recently in the *Journal of Medical Science Monitor*, the relationship between eating fish and a variety of markers of health were assessed in a group of individuals aged 65-100 years hailing from the Mediterranean region.

Higher fish intake was found to be associated with lower systolic blood pressure, fasting blood sugar, cholesterol, and triglycerides.

Also, for every 3.5-ounce decrease in weekly fish consumption, there was found to be a 19 percent increased risk of having an additional risk factor such as high blood pressure, diabetes, or obesity.

The authors of this study concluded: "Long-term fish intake is associated with reduced levels of the most common cardiovascular disease risk markers in a cohort



SARDINES: They are high in omega-3 fatty acids.

MARCEL MOCHET/AFAP/GETTY IMAGES

individuals have actually been given fish or fish oil (omega-3 rich) supplements to see what effects these had on health outcomes. A review of 50-odd studies concluded that omega-3 fats, either from oily fish or fish oil supplements, have the capacity to reduce death rates due to heart disease, as well as overall risk of death [2].

References:

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2. Wang C., et al. n3 Fatty acids from fish or fish-oil supplements, but not linolenic acid, benefit cardiovascular disease outcomes in primary- and secondary-prevention studies: a systematic review. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 2006; 84:5-17.

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Smoking Marijuana Raises Risk of Schizophrenia

LONDON (Reuters)—Using marijuana increases the risk of developing a psychotic illness, such as schizophrenia, according to a study that provides some of the strongest evidence yet linking the drug to a mental disorder.

Marijuana is one of the most commonly used illegal substances in many countries with up to 20 percent of young people in places like Britain reporting either some use or heavy use, British researchers said, citing government statistics.

Many consider it on par with alcohol or tobacco, but the results show marijuana poses a danger many smokers underestimate, said Stanley Zammit, a psychiatrist at Cardiff University and the University of Bristol, who worked on the study.

The researchers found that marijuana users had a 41 percent increased chance of developing psychosis marked by symptoms of hallucinations or delusions later in life than those who never used the drug. The risk rose with heavier consumption.

"If you compare other substances like alcohol or tobacco it may not be as harmful, but what we are saying is neither is it completely safe," Zammit said in a telephone interview.

Other findings have highlighted the link between marijuana use and the risk of schizophrenia-like symptoms such as paranoia, hearing voices, and seeing things that are not there.

But this study marks one of the most comprehensive, thorough, and reliable reviews of its kind and should serve as a warning, two Danish researchers wrote in an accompanying comment in the *Lancet* medical journal, which published recently.

Evidence

They said the results mean an estimated 800 cases of schizophrenia in the United Kingdom could be prevented each year by ending marijuana consumption.

"We therefore agree with the authors' conclusion that there is now sufficient evidence to warn young people that cannabis use will increase their risk of psychosis later in life," they wrote.



MARIJUANA: Smoking it is hard on lungs and mental health. DONALD WEBER/GETTY IMAGES

The team did not look directly at people who used marijuana but instead conducted what is called a meta-analysis by reviewing 35 studies in search of a potential connection between psychotic illness and using marijuana.

They reviewed evidence from studies ranging from one year to 27 years and only looked at research that did not include people already showing signs of psychotic illness.

The researchers also adjusted for factors—like depression or a susceptibility to harder drugs—that could one day lead to a mental disorder to focus more directly on the links between marijuana and psychosis, Zammit said.

"We have described a consistent association between cannabis use and psychotic symptoms, including disabling psychotic disorders," the team wrote.

But both Zammit and the Danish researchers said ultimate proof to show a direct relationship would have to come through a randomized trial of healthy young people and long-term follow-up.

Such a study, however, is unlikely given that marijuana is illegal in most countries and the ethical questions due to the drug's known harmful effects, they said.

One Cannabis Joint As Bad As Five Cigarettes

LONDON (Reuters)—Smoking one cannabis joint is as harmful to a person's lungs as having up to five cigarettes, according to recently-published research.

Those who smoked cannabis damaged both the lungs' small fine airways, used for transporting oxygen, and the large airways, which blocked air flow, the researchers said.

It meant cannabis smokers complained of wheezing, coughing, and chest tightness, the study by experts at the Medical Research Institute of New Zealand found.

The researchers tested 339 people—those who smoked only cannabis, those who smoked tobacco, those who smoked both, and non-

smokers.

The study found only those who smoked tobacco suffered from the crippling lung disease emphysema, but cannabis use stopped the lungs from working properly.

"The extent of this damage was directly related to the number of joints smoked, with higher consumption linked to greater incapacity," said the authors of the report published in the medical journal *Thorax*.

"The effect on the lungs of each joint was equivalent to smoking between 2.5 and five cigarettes in one go."

The British government is considering whether cannabis should be reclassified as a more serious drug because of the dangers associated with stronger strains.

"The danger cannabis poses to respiratory health is consistently being overlooked," said Helena Shovelton, Chief Executive of the British Lung Foundation.

"Smoking a joint is more harmful to the lungs than smoking a cigarette, and we have just banned people from doing that in public places because of the health risks."

Last week British researchers said using marijuana increased the risk of developing a psychotic illness such as schizophrenia.

Carbs Linked to Vision Loss

NEW YORK (Reuters Health)—The carbohydrates present in a diet can influence the risk of age-related macular degeneration (AMD), the most common cause of vision loss in older adults, according to a report in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, July 2007.

"AMD appears to share several carbohydrate-related mechanisms and risk factors with diabetes-related diseases, including [eye] and cardiovascular disease," writes Dr. Allen Taylor, of Tufts University, Boston.

To investigate further, the researchers conducted a study of 4,099 participants, aged 55 to 80 years, in the Age-Related Eye Disease Study. The team classified a total of 8,125 eyes into one of five AMD groups based on the severity of the disease and other factors.

Regular consumption of a diet containing carbs that quickly raise blood sugar levels significantly increases the risk of AMD relative to a diet that slowly raises blood sugar levels. Such a diet could prevent 20 percent of AMD cases.