

# Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

August 20, 2017

## “Obesity, Overweight, and Conflicted Studies”

The obesity scare has been around for decades but where is the truth about being overweight? It all started in 2004, when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention scientists published a study suggesting obesity was responsible for 400,000 deaths a year, making it almost as deadly as smoking. It turned out to be a false alarm: The authors made methodological errors that skewed their number too high. So, in 2005, another study found obesity was only responsible for about 112,000 excess deaths. They also found something peculiar. Being “overweight,” but not obese, was not associated with an increased risk of death at all. In 2013, a meta-analysis study found that even when adjusting for smoking, age, and sex, overweight people—those with a body mass index of between 25 and 30—had a 6 percent lower risk of dying than normal-weight individuals. Normal BMI for women is 18.5-24.9. Obesity is technically defined as having a BMI greater than 30 kg/m<sup>2</sup> or more. The paper found that in terms of mortality, it’s better for this number to be slightly elevated than to be normal. A 5-foot-6-inch woman, in other words, would be better off weighing 180 pounds than 120. But, a Harvard so called expert called this study “a pile of rubbish.” More confusing studies have followed. In 2016, other researchers from around the world published a paper in *The Lancet* analyzing 239 studies and millions of study subjects. Their takeaway was clear: Above the normal weight range, the fatter you are, the higher your risk of premature death. “On average, overweight people lose about one year of life expectancy, and moderately obese people lose about three years of life expectancy.” Still, other studies have since implied there’s a health benefit to heaviness. Last year researchers in Copenhagen looked at three cohorts of Danes during the 1970s, ’90s, and between 2003 and 2013. In the 1970s, the BMI that was associated with the lowest risk of death was 23.7—so-called normal weight. Surprisingly, by the 2000s, the “healthiest” BMI had shifted up to 27, or technically overweight. In 2014, New Orleans cardiologist Carl Lavie published the book, *The Obesity Paradox: When Thinner Means Sicker and Heavier Means Healthier*, based in part on his research showing that overweight and mildly obese patients with cardiovascular disease have a better prognosis than their leaner counterparts. In a 2017 paper, Stokes, Willett, and others found being overweight *was* associated with mortality—but only if you looked at a person’s maximum weight over the past 16 years. According to their findings, it’s *having ever been* overweight that’s risky.

In the America that I love, there are no clear-cut answers associating overweight and obesity to mortality.

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