REPORT BRIEF:
Investigation of the Impact of Weight Status and Psychosocial Factors on Pediatric Health Care Utilization & Costs

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In Brief

Obese children tax health care system

Recent studies show a third of children in the United States are overweight or obese. Their weight puts them at risk for myriad health problems including diabetes, heart problems and psychological issues. In addition, a new University of Florida study demonstrates that the overwhelmingly large population of overweight children has a substantial economic impact on the health care system.

University of Florida researchers found that obese children visit hospitals and doctors’ offices more often than children of healthy weight, incurring an average of almost 25 percent more medical costs during the year examined. Overweight children did not incur more medical costs than their healthy weight peers.

Obese children also had an average of nearly 20 percent more Medicaid claims than their healthy weight peers.

Analysts used data from about 200 children aged seven to 13 and their parents. The parent and child pairs were enrolled in Florida’s Medicaid program and attended pediatric primary care clinics at Shands at the University of Florida.

Researchers were surprised to discover that psychosocial functioning did not significantly impact the amount that obese children visited the doctor.

This is one of a handful of studies showing that obese children tax the health care system more than healthy weight children, particularly after controlling for psychosocial functioning. The findings imply significant savings for the health care system if measures were taken to prevent or treat childhood obesity, particularly looking ahead to the children’s adulthood.

This study is limited by a relatively small sample size and retrospective design, which does not allow for prediction of future health services.