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Institute of Education, University of London

## **Middle-aged men have more reason to diet than women do, new study suggests**

Men are significantly more likely than women to be overweight or obese in middle age, according to new research from the Institute of Education (IOE), University of London.

The IOE study found that more than two thirds of British men (68 per cent) were either overweight (45 per cent) or obese (23 per cent) at age 42. In contrast, 29 per cent of women the same age were overweight and a further 20 per cent were obese.

The research was conducted by Dr Alice Sullivan and Matt Brown from the IOE's [Centre for Longitudinal Studies](#). They studied the body mass index (BMI) of almost 10,000 men and women in their early forties being followed by the [1970 British Cohort Study](#) (BCS70), which is funded by the [Economic and Social Research Council](#) (ESRC).

Although men in this age group seemingly have more cause for concern, the researchers found that they are significantly less likely than women to realise they are carrying excess weight. Thirty per cent of men who were overweight believed they were about the right weight, compared to 9 per cent of overweight women.

Similarly, among those who were obese, twice as many men (50 per cent) as women (25 per cent) said they were only slightly overweight.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, only four in ten men (41 per cent) who were overweight said they were making an effort to shed excess pounds, compared to two thirds (66 per cent) of women. Obese women were also more likely to be trying to lose weight (77 per cent compared to 62 per cent of men).

Dr Sullivan will present the findings at a seminar in London on 7 November, as part of the [ESRC Festival of Social Science](#). She will underline the importance of making men more aware of their BMI status and the health risks associated with excess weight.

“People who are overweight or obese face a higher risk of many health problems, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes and certain cancers,” she says. “But carrying excess weight is far more socially acceptable for men than for women, and men will not respond to health messages about weight and obesity if they do not recognise that they are overweight.”

“This is a particular concern given that cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death for men aged 35 and over.”

The researchers also found that men and women born in 1970 are considerably more likely to be obese at age 42 than those born in 1958 were at the same age. Sixteen per cent of both men and women in the 1958 generation were obese at age 42, compared to one in five women (20 per cent) and nearly a quarter of men (23 per cent) in their early forties today.

“People born in 1970 grew up at a time when lifestyles were becoming increasingly inactive and high-calorie convenience foods were widely available for the first time,” says Dr Sullivan.

“We know that both exercise and diet are important for maintaining a healthy weight. But our findings show that ready meals, frozen foods, and takeaways are popular with this generation, while nearly a third (32 per cent) of women and a quarter (24 per cent) of men do no vigorous exercise in a typical week.”

“It may seem surprising that more men do vigorous exercise than women, even though they are more likely to be overweight or obese. This suggests that poor diet is a key factor affecting men's weight in particular.”

Nearly half (47 per cent) of men and women born in 1970 said they ate convenience foods, such as frozen fish-fingers, burgers, oven chips or ready-made pizzas, at least once or twice a week, and 28 per cent ate ready meals once a week or more. Nearly a third (32 per cent) of those who were obese ate takeaways at least once a week, compared to 21 per cent of those who were normal weight.

*Overweight and obesity in mid-life: Evidence from the 1970 British Cohort Study at age 42* will be available to download from the [CLS website](#) on 7 November.

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**Notes for editors:**

1. Body Mass Index (BMI) measures the ratio between height and mass. BMI is calculated by dividing mass in kilograms by squared height in metres ( $\text{kg/m}^2$ ). BMI is used to classify individuals as underweight ( $\text{BMI} < 18.5$ ), normal weight (18.5 to 25), overweight (25 to 30) or obese (over 30).
2. The [1970 British Cohort Study](#) (BCS70) is following the lives of more than 17,000 people born in England, Scotland and Wales in a single week of 1970. Since the birth survey in 1970, there have been eight further surveys of all cohort members at ages 5, 10, 16, 26, 30, 34, 38 and 42. The age 42 survey was carried out from 1 May 2012 to 30 April 2013. The age 46 survey is due to take place in 2016. Over the course of the cohort members' lives, BCS70 has collected information on health, physical, educational and social development, and economic circumstances, among other factors.
3. BCS70 is managed by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS), which is based at the Department of Quantitative Social Science, Institute of Education. CLS is responsible for running three of Britain's other major cohort studies: the 1958 National Child Development Study, the Millennium Cohort Study and the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England. Further information available at [www.cls.ioe.ac.uk](http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk)
4. The Institute of Education is a college of the University of London that specialises in education and related areas of social science and professional practice. In the most recent Research Assessment Exercise two-thirds of the Institute's research activity was judged to be internationally significant and over a third was judged to be "world leading". The Institute was recognised by Ofsted in 2010 for its "high quality" initial teacher training programmes that inspire its students "to want to be outstanding teachers". The IOE is a member of the 1994 Group, which brings together 12 internationally renowned, research-intensive universities. More at [www.ioe.ac.uk](http://www.ioe.ac.uk)
5. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is the UK's largest organisation for funding research on economic and social issues. It supports independent, high quality research which has an impact on business, the public sector and the third sector. The ESRC's total budget for 2012-13 was £205 million. At any one time the ESRC supports over 4,000 researchers and postgraduate students in academic institutions and independent research institutes. More at [www.esrc.ac.uk](http://www.esrc.ac.uk)

6. The Festival of Social Science is run by the Economic and Social Research Council and takes place from 2-9 November 2013. With events from some of the country's leading social scientists, the Festival celebrates the very best of British social science research and how it influences our social, economic and political lives - both now and in the future. This year's Festival of Social Science has over 170 creative and exciting events across the UK to encourage businesses, charities, government agencies, schools and college students to discuss, discover and debate topical social science issues. Press releases detailing some of the varied events and a full list of the programme are available at the Festival website. You can now follow updates from the Festival on Twitter using #esrcfestival.

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