

## Rise in Disability Rates Linked to Obesity, Data Says

The disability rates in the last two decades rose sharply for Americans younger than 60 and researchers at the RAND Corporation say that rise is linked to the obesity epidemic.

The study, published in *Health Affairs*, found that Americans ages 30-49 who were disabled in their ability to care for themselves or perform other routine tasks increased by more than 50% from 1984 to 2000. Researchers found smaller but still significant increases for those ages 18 to 29 and those ages 50 to 59. While part of the increase may be due to disability insurance incentives and technology that saves the lives of people who even a few years ago might have died, the only factor researchers could identify that would explain such a large jump in disability is obesity.

“Obesity is the only trend that is commensurate in size with what we found happening with disability,” said the lead author of the report, Darius Lakdawalla, who is a RAND economist. “It’s the only suspect.”

Researchers, who were surprised by the results, warned that the increase in the disability rate could affect the nation’s future health care costs. “People who are disabled generally use a lot more medical services so in the long run this trend could add a lot of costs to the nation’s health care bill,” said Dana Goldman, a study co-author and director of health economics at Rand Health.

Musculoskeletal problems, which are linked to obesity, are a leading cause of disability, along with mental illness and diabetes claims doubled during the study period and musculoskeletal problems also multiplied.

Researchers at RAND, a large independent health policy research organization, used data from 1984 to 2000 collected by the annual *National Health Interview Survey*, a nationwide survey of about 36,000 households. Support for the study came from the National Institute on Aging and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.