PREVALENCE OF OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY AMONG SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST AFRICAN AMERICAN AND CAUCASIAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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All age, sex, and racial groups are affected by the obesity epidemic in the United States, although disparities exist among these groups. The Seventh-day Adventists are a religious group of people who are believed to live longer and healthier lives than do their non-Adventist counterparts because they do not smoke or drink alcohol and they eat a healthier diet. This study assessed the prevalence of overweight and obesity among Seventh-day Adventist college students attending 2 private universities in the southern United States. Most students' body mass index (65.8%) was within the normal weight category, 3.7% were underweight, 20.6% were overweight, and 9.9% were obese. Body mass index $\geq 25$ kg/m$^2$ was more prevalent among men and African Americans. In all ethnic subgroups, the prevalence of overweight and obesity was lower than that among non-Adventist students reported in other studies. (Ethn Dis. 2009;19:111–114)

Key Words: Obesity, Overweight, Adventists, College Students

INTRODUCTION

The increase in the rate of overweight and obesity in the United States in the last few decades has been observed in all age, sex, and racial groups.\(^1\) Although the Healthy People 2010 objective for obesity prevalence has been set for 15%, data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that in 2005 and 2006 more than 34% (\(\geq 72\) million) of Americans aged $\geq 20$ years were obese.\(^1,2\) In 1995, 1 in 5 college students was overweight,\(^3\) and since that time rates of overweight have increased.

Since about the mid-1800s the Seventh-day Adventist church has emphasized wholeness and health as a religious duty of every church member. Adventists are believed to live longer than do non-Adventists and are less at risk for some chronic health conditions. The health status of Adventists is attributed to their lifestyle, which includes abstinence from smoking and alcohol and low intake of meat. Approximately 40% of Adventists are either ovo-lacto vegetarians or vegans. Most data regarding health among Seventh-day Adventists come from either middle-aged or older adults. No data have been published on the rate of obesity among Seventh-day Adventist college students. The purpose of this cross-sectional study was to assess weight status according to the CDC body mass index (BMI) categories and examine prevalence of overweight/obesity by sex, racial/ethnic background, and diet (vegetarian vs. meat eaters) among Seventh-day Adventist college students at 2 private higher learning institutions.

No data have been published on the rate of obesity among Seventh-day Adventist college students.

METHODS

Data Collection

Before collecting data, we submitted our research protocol to the institutional review board at East Carolina University. Data were collected by a faculty member from each of the 2 institutions. So that our sample was representative of all majors, surveys were distributed in general education classes offered to all undergraduate students. Students were informed about the purpose of the study both verbally and in writing before surveys were distributed. Students were assured that their participation in the survey research was voluntary and that they would not be penalized if they refuse to participate. Students were also informed that by completing the surveys, they consented to research protocol and to dissemination of the results in professional journals. No compensation was offered for participation in the research project; however, some instructors offered extra credit toward the students' grades. All students present in the classroom during the time the survey was administered completed the survey. BMI was calculated from self-reported weight and height on the survey and grouped according to CDC categories: underweight (\(< 18.5\) kg/m$^2$), normal (18.5–24.9 kg/m$^2$), overweight (25.0–29.9 kg/m$^2$), and obese (\(\geq 30.0\) kg/m$^2$).