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MEDIA STATEMENT

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ADDING WEIGHT TO CALLS FOR BMI REVISION

It may be timely to review the body mass index (BMI) classification for older adults as new research suggests that older overweight people are less likely to die over a 10 year period than their normal weight peers.

A statistical measurement which utilises a person's height and weight, the BMI has long been used as a formula by the World Health Organization to enable health professionals to discuss weight problems objectively with their patients.

However, a decade-long research project led by Winthrop Professor Leon Flicker at The University of Western Australia found that the category of overweight based on the index may not be a useful tool for Australian men and women aged between 70 and 75.

Professor Flicker and his team assessed 9,200 men and women for their health and lifestyle as part of a study into healthy ageing. They found that adults aged over 70 years who are classified as overweight are less likely to die than adults in the normal weight range. The researchers also found that this holds true for the common causes of death including both cancer and cardiovascular disease; and that being sedentary doubles the risk of death for women but only increases the risk by a quarter in men.

Published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, the study sheds light on the situation in Australia, ranked the third most obese country after the United States and the United Kingdom.

These results add evidence to the claims that the World Health Organisation's (WHO) BMI thresholds for overweight and obese are overly restrictive for older people. However, the benefits were only seen in the overweight category and not in those people who are obese. This research found that the same was true for men and women.

"The study shows that those people who survive to age 70 in reasonable health (and hence participate in these studies) have a different set of risk and benefits associated with amount of body fat compared with younger people," Professor Flicker, Director Western Australian Centre for Health and Ageing, said.

"Concerns had been raised about encouraging overweight older people to lose weight and the object of our study was to examine the major unresolved question of 'what level of BMI is associated with the lowest mortality risk in this group?'"

MEDIA REFERENCE

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