Bodyweight trends among Finnish university students in 2000–2012

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Background

Obesity-related diseases are a serious individual and public-health concern. For the present study, we analysed bodyweight development among Finnish university students in 2000–2012.

Methods

The data derive from Finnish Student Health Surveys in 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2012. The national surveys covered undergraduate students aged under 35, with representative samples of 5,000 students/survey. Response rates were 63%, 63%, 55% and 49% (a postal questionnaire study, online responding possible since 2008).

Results

In 2000–2012, the proportion of overweight students (BMI ≥25kg/m²) increased from 26% to 39% in males and from 13% to 19% in females. Obesity (BMI ≥30kg/m²) doubled (3.8% vs. 6.7% in males, 2.1% vs. 5.4% in females), whereas the proportion of underweight (BMI ≤18.5kg/m²) students remained unchanged.

Mean bodyweight increased by 3.0kg (76.9kg vs. 79.9kg, p˂0.001) for males, and by 2.3kg (60.9kg vs. 63.2kg, p˂0.001) for females.

Overweight became more common across all age groups. While 16% of men under 22 were overweight in 2000, the corresponding figure in 2012 was 27%.

In the oldest age group (30-35 years), 44% of men were overweight in 2000, and in 2012, more than one half were overweight.

Conclusions

The trend of increasing overweight and obesity among university students is clear, and students are more frequently overweight already when entering the university.

Student healthcare should offer diverse tools for weight management, and also enhance staff members' abilities to address the matter during appointments. We need to develop community interventions, group activities, self-care materials, service pathways and mobile health support.