

Retirement and obesity among the near elderly

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Abstract: This dissertation investigates the causal effect of retirement on obesity-related health behavior. With the increasing prevalence of obesity, the health consequences of obesity are major causes of soaring health care costs. The prevalence and growth of obesity is highest among those in their fifties and sixties, close to the age of the highest retirement rate in the US. Retirement represents conspicuous changes in time availability, financial constraints, physical activity, and scope of social activity, all of which could influence the risk of obesity.

In the identification of the causal effect of retirement, regression estimates from different assumptions on unobserved heterogeneity are compared. The econometric strategy takes advantage of the individual-level panel dataset with rich information on health, occupation, financial status and employment history provided by the Health and Retirement Study from 1992 to 2002.

This study finds significant weight gain led by retirement and by decreasing working-hours of current workers. Retirement lowers the participation in vigorous physical activity only for the formerly physical workers and reduces total daily metabolic equivalent regardless of occupation type. Retirement reduces the consumption of food away from home but does not change the consumption of food at home nor alcohol intake. All of these health behavioral modifications caused by retirement are evident among people with lower wealth who are initially more likely to be obese and to retire at an earlier age, and among former physical workers. The overall finding of this study implies that weight gain with retirement could be largely from the loss of occupational physical demands which is not fully compensated by physical activities during the increased non-working hours.

With the baby boomer population approaching retirement age, the increased risk of obesity caused by retirement could have considerable impact on the health status of older adults and the health care system. Promotion of physical activity of retirees should be a priority of public health efforts to reduce the risk of obesity and health care cost ascribed to retirement. Effective policies to enhance physical activity of retirees especially for the former physical workers with low wealth should be investigated in future research.

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