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Overview

• Numerous studies linking obesity to increased risk of disability and receipt of SSDI (Burkhauser and Cawley, 2005; Lakdawalla, Bhattacharya, and Goldman, 2004; Ferraro et al., 2002; Narbro et al., 1996)

• Currently, we have a limited understanding of how being obese interacts with the disability application process
  – Not a listed impairment since October 1999
Contribution

• Research purpose is to examine rates of obesity amongst SSDI and SSI applicants, as well as the role of obesity in disability determinations

• Use SSA administrative (EDCS) data to examine:
  – Trends in applicant obesity relative to population
  – Level of SSA review required by BMI category
  – Initial determinations and allowances by BMI category

• Data include self-reported weight and height at time of application
Summary of Findings

• Obesity prevalence amongst applicants has increased along with prevalence in general working-age population

• Obesity more prevalent amongst disability applicants
  – Partially driven by demographic (age, gender, education) differences
  – Not race?

• Musculoskeletal determination increases with BMI

• Greater prevalence of obesity among applicants at higher levels of review
Initial Determinations and Allowances Made in 2013, by Body System and BMI Category*

Trends in Obesity Prevalence and SSDI Receipt
Obesity and Disability Application

• Fundamentally, we are interested in causal relationships for shaping public policy responses

• Relationship between obesity and disability complex (potentially endogenous)

• Also complexity (ambiguity) in how obesity interacts with disability application, determination, and application review
Obesity and Disability Application

• Factors driving relationship between obesity and disability:

  • At the individual level:
    – Disability (illness) can result in weight gain or loss
    – Certain demographic groups more prone to obesity and over-represented in disability applications
    – May face discrimination or a wage penalty for obesity

  • At the macro level:
    – Obesity more prevalent in south and mid-west
    – Areas of high unemployment
Prevalence* of Self-Reported Obesity Among U.S. Adults by State and Territory, BRFSS, 2013

*Prevalence estimates reflect BRFSS methodological changes started in 2011. These estimates should not be compared to prevalence estimates before 2011.
Unemployment Rates by State, 2013
Further Analysis

• NHANES data are particularly well-suited to analyzing the effect of obesity on disability application
  – Contain detailed health information (potentially prior to disability onset or at least application)
  – Have multiple measures of adiposity including percent body fat (BIA) and measured weight and height
  – Contain a reasonable set of demographic characteristics
  – Multiple waves linked to SSA MBR, SSR, PHUS, and 831 files

• Burkhauser, Cawley, and Schmeiser (2008)
  – Alternative measures of adiposity better predict SSDI application (although self-reported BMI performs reasonably well)
  – Adiposity mainly predictive of application for whites
Policy Implications

• Obesity leveling off, but at a high prevalence
  – Child obesity also leveling off
• If obesity increases probability of SSDI or SSI application, or makes SSA’s determination process more difficult then the ongoing high prevalence will continue to be a burden on SSA
Policy Implications

• From a policy perspective, I’m most interested in the implications for how SSA handles obese disability applicants
  – Whether or not obesity increases disability or disability applications, beyond SSA’s control
  – Plenty of public health and economic reasons to reduce obesity in general population

• Does SSA require clearer guidelines for assessing whether obese applicants are disabled? Implications for obese recipient employment? Something else?
Conclusion

• Area of inquiry is important given the prevalence of obesity amongst disability applicants

• Curious to see the implications of subsequent research for informing SSA’s response to increased prevalence of obesity
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