

Mild obesity among elderly aged 80 and over linked to lower mortality, study says

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Being overweight or mildly obese is linked to reduced mortality for Chinese people aged 80 and over, challenging the optimal body mass index (BMI) for the age group, a 20-year study reveals.

The findings, based on research on over 27,000 older people in China, suggest the ideal weight for the elderly population may need to be revised upwards and more attention should be paid to preventing older people from being underweight and losing weight, the researchers said.

“The obesity paradox suggested the optimal BMI was likely to be sensitive to age and may be around overweight or mild obesity for the oldest old,” the team wrote in a study printed in the peer-reviewed *Nature Ageing* journal.

“It challenges the application of international and national guidelines on optimal BMI to this population,” said the scientists from the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention and health researchers at universities in China and the US.

“More attention should be paid to adequate nutritional support and prevention of underweight, and the maintenance of optimal body weight and body composition in the oldest old to promote healthy ageing.”

The BMI formula is a ratio of weight to height-squared used to determine whether a person is in a healthy weight range. The World Health Organization rates a BMI over 25 as overweight and over 30 as obese.

The researchers said the existing recommendations of healthy BMI were based on evidence from young and middle-aged populations and did not sufficiently represent people aged over 80.

The research is based on the Chinese Longitudinal Healthy Longevity Survey covering people from 23 provinces.

The team said participants' BMI was low, similar to other Asian populations, and that the role of obesity in adverse health outcomes needed to be explored.

Follow-up surveys from 1998 to 2018 recorded around 22,200 deaths, of which 77 per cent had a documented cause of death. Nearly 14 per cent died of cardiovascular disease and the rest of other causes.

The team said the risk of mortality, particularly from non-cardiovascular disorders, decreased with increasing BMI values.

They saw a similar inverse association in waist circumference, a measure of abdominal obesity more sensitive than BMI.

“One possible explanation for the inverse association of BMI with mortality is that overweight and obesity may be an indicator of better nutritional status and that the benefits of better nutrition outweigh the harms caused by higher BMI,” the team said.