



OBESITY: Is it contagious? A recent study points to that possibility. SPENCER PLATT/GETTY IMAGES

Obesity May Be Socially Contagious

By **WAHIBA CHAIR**
Special to The Epoch Times

According to the law of attraction, one could argue the social implications of obesity: If you are overweight, you will feel more comfortable among other overweight people, which would result in a trend toward higher weights.

A 32-year medical study of 12,067 people funded by the National Institutes of Health, and published July 26 in the *New England Journal of Medicine* has concluded just that, finding that "closeness of friendship" is relevant to the spread of obesity.

As part of the Framingham Heart Study, initiated in 1971, researchers from Harvard University; the University of California, San Diego; and Mt. Auburn Hospital used longitudinal statistical models to examine several aspects of the spread of obesity.

The study looked at the existence of clusters of obese persons within a network—the social contagiousness of obesity and its dependence on the nature of social ties.

Researchers mapped participants' updated social networks that included friends, siblings, spouses, and neighbors, and made body mass indices available for all subjects.

The findings support a correlation between weight gain and social ties, depending on the nature of the relationship. "In general, the results are not surprising, but the extent of

the influence I think is larger than we might have expected," says Dr. Diane T. Finegood, scientific director of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research's Institute of Nutrition, Metabolism, and Diabetes.

During a study of a two- to four-year period, an obese friend can increase a person's chances of becoming obese by 57 percent, while a sibling comes in second at 40 percent, followed by a spouse at 37 percent.

"What is somewhat surprising is the friendship strength relative to that of a spouse, since that is someone you live with on a daily basis and share more time with, during which you are engaged in food or physical activity related behavior," says Finegood.

Neighbors in the same geographic location do not seem to influence each other. Same-sex relationships had more impact than those of the opposite sex. Same-sex mutual friends—people who mutually listed each other as friends—saw the highest influence.

The study concludes that social distance appears to be more important than geographic distance in terms of spreading obesity, while smoking was not significantly associated with it.

According to co-author Dr. Nicholas Christakis, a professor of medical sociology at Harvard Medical School in Boston, the findings emphasize the epidemical nature of obesity, which could be useful in reversing a growing trend.

"The results are symmetrical, so that if your social contacts gain weight, you gain weight, and if they lose weight, you lose weight."

This could support the favoring of group public health interventions as more cost-effective and worthwhile than individual ones in terms of weight loss, obesity treatment, and prevention.

Christakis notes that the study does not suggest the social isolation of overweight individuals. "We're not suggesting that people should sever their ties with overweight friends; having friends is healthy for you."

Experts say the study is not conclusive since hidden factors could be to blame. According to Finegood, the study does not tell us whether the formation of new social networks would have the same effect, but it raises the possibility.

Professor Andrew Hill of the University of Leeds says, "The statistics may be meaningful, but in real life this is not very helpful to people who are overweight—it might be very complicated."

Future research plans involve the analysis of the data geared towards other health-related problems such as, drinking and smoking, and their social implications within several degrees of separation.

Reference: *The Spread of Obesity in a Large Social Network Over 32 Years*, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, (online): <http://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/full/357141370>.

Are You Damaging Your Liver?

By **W. GIFFORD-JONES, M.D.**

"What causes liver disease?" Ask anyone, and 99 percent will answer, "It's in that Cabernet Sauvignon or other alcohol. But today the liver can be injured by known, but equally hazardous habits. 5 being unfriendly to your liver? And what from the 'Mayflower,' the ship that carried this continent in 1620?"

The football-sized liver is an amazing organ. It performs hundreds of functions never before in history, its most important changing the toxic substances we ingest that can be safely removed from the body. The liver has great power to regenerate and is indestructible.

So what's the problem? Consider the damage done to the liver every day. Ads that tell us there's no reason to suffer even a few thousandths of people swallow these M&M candy. But swallowing just more than the recommended dose (Tylenol), along with excess alcohol, can lead to liver and death.

Thousands of cold sufferers are given antibiotics that have no effect on viruses. They reach for a variety of cold remedies. Both place a needless burden on the liver.

Every year I see an increase in the use of herbal medicines. But a recent Mayo Clinic cautions that herb kava, comfrey, chaparral, kohl can be toxic to the liver. Remedy drug, hemlock, that killed Socrates.

Be careful of what gets on your face. Aerosol cleaner, make sure the label says to wear a mask. Use protective clothing to control insects or fungicide mask when painting with a spray.

Don't become a victim to that are preventable. Hepatitis and drink contaminated by elderly people.

Today, large numbers of people are infected with hepatitis B. Spores and contaminated needles, result in liver cancer and cirrhosis.

One-third of patients without symptoms. Other symptoms include joint pain, and jaundice.

What's shocking is that hepatitis B are not the only

A Little

By **DR. JOHN BRIFFA**
Special to The Epoch Times

Fish is what you eat, and there's not a surprise that it has been associated with health benefits. For example, a study published recently in the *Medical Science* journal found a relationship between a variety of markers of heart disease in a group of 65-100 years old in the Mediterranean region.

Higher fish intake