

Knowledge and attitudes towards and prevalence of overweight and obesity among undergraduate students at Universiti Kuala Lumpur Royal College of Medicine: A cross-sectional study

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Abstract

Introduction: Overweight and obesity pose significant health risks, affecting social and economic well-being and potentially hindering mental health and learning outcomes. This study investigated the knowledge, attitudes, and prevalence of overweight and obesity among undergraduate students at Universiti Kuala Lumpur Royal College of Medicine (UniKL RCMP), Malaysia.

Methods: A total of 351 UniKL RCMP undergraduate students participated in this study. Descriptive analysis was used to evaluate the sociodemographic and educational profiles of respondents. The chi-square test was conducted to identify the relationship between the sociodemographic and educational profiles and the level of knowledge and attitudes towards overweight and obesity.

Results: The prevalence of overweight and obesity was 25.4%. The majority of the respondents possessed a good level of knowledge regarding overweight and obesity (n=316, 90%). The respondents' programme was significantly associated with their level of knowledge (P=0.001).

Conclusion: This study provides important information to university authorities, students, lecturers, parents and other stakeholders in education and health sectors about the impacts of overweight and obesity on the physical, social and academic welfare of university students.

Introduction

Recently, the prevalence of obesity and overweight among adults has significantly increased.¹ Overweight and obesity are characterised as abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that could be harmful to human health.² Anthropometric indices including body mass index (BMI) and total body fat percentage are widely used for assessing the physical well-being of young adults. BMI is calculated as weight in kilograms divided by the square of height in metres. BMI is the most useful index in assessing obesity and overweight, as it is measured consistently for both sexes and all age groups. In adults, the BMI indicating overweight is ≥ 25 kg/m², while that indicating obesity is ≥ 30 kg/m². A systematic review and meta-analysis conducted in 2021 showed that obese adults had up to 32%

higher risk of depression than underweight adults.³

In the National Health and Morbidity Survey in 2019,⁴ 30.4% of adults were overweight, and 19.7% were obese, consistent with the increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity since the 1960s. In 2016, over 1.9 billion people aged ≥ 18 years were overweight, and over 650 million adults were obese.⁵ Overall, 39% of adults aged ≥ 18 years (39% of men and 40% of women) were overweight, and 13% were obese. The worldwide prevalence of obesity tripled from 1975 to 2016.² The prevalence of obesity, especially among urban people, has reached epidemic levels in several developing nations including Malaysia.³ Over the past 20 years, Malaysia has been reported to have a high adult obesity rate, along with other Southeast Asian nations.⁶