Morbidly Obese Use 10% of Health Care Dollars in U.S.

Chicago — Health care costs for morbidly obese adults are nearly double those of normal-weight adults, according to a study presented at the combined annual meeting of the Central Society for Clinical Research and the Midwestern section of the American Federation for Medical Research.

Morbidly obese individuals make up less than 3% of the U.S. adult population, but they account for more than 10% of all health care spending in this country, reported the study’s lead investigator, David E. Arterburn, M.D., of the University of Cincinnati. The study defined morbid obesity as a body mass index of 40 or greater (Int. J. Obes. Relat. Metab. Disord. 2005; 29:334-9).

Of U.S. health care expenditures, $36 billion were linked to excess body weight in the year 2000, up from a previously published estimate of $11.5 billion in 1998 (Obes. Res. 2004;12:18-24). Health care expenses for morbidly obese adults totaled more than $1 billion, Dr. Arterburn and his colleagues reported. They calculated this total by analyzing data from a nationally representative sample of 16,262 adults from the 2000 Medical Expenditure Panel Survey.

Adults who were morbidly obese had elevated costs in all health care categories, Dr. Arterburn said, compared with adults considered to be of normal weight. Morbidly obese persons had higher per capita annual expenditures for office visits, outpatient hospital care, inpatient hospitalizations, and prescription drugs. Dr. Arterburn and his associates did not study the effect of age on health care expenditures. However, he said, “it’s known there’s a delay in onset of obesity-associated morbidities, so one would expect expenditures to go up with age.” The mean age of their sample was 43.4 years.

The researchers adjusted the odds of incurring health care expenses for socioeconomic variables, type of health insurance, and smoking status.

Nearly 4 million U.S. adults were morbidly obese in 2000, according to this study, supported by a grant from the Department of Veterans Affairs. Because weight and height were self-reported in the survey data, Dr. Arterburn said he believes the study underestimated the prevalence of morbid obesity.