TuSalud

Combo of Obesity and Heart Disease May Cause Cognitive Decline in Latinos

Although being overweight may not directly lead to memory problems, its related heart problems might.

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In the medical chain of cause and effect, studies show that obesity is linked to several heart problems, including high blood sugar/diabetes, hypertension and high cholesterol. These cardiovascular issues, in turn, are considered to be major risk factors for Alzheimer's disease and dementia. But are obesity and cognitive decline also linked? Perhaps not, says a new study conducted by researchers at the University of California San Diego (UCSD) School of Medicine and published in the Journal of Alzheimer's Disease. Instead, it may be the combined threat Latino communities should keep an eye on, a recent press release by UCSD reports.

For the study, researchers examined data from more than 6,000 people ages 50 to 86 enrolled in the university's Study of Latinos Investigation of Neurocognitive Aging. The study included a diverse cohort, including Central Americans, Cubans, Mexicans, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans and South Americans. Participants were from one of four cities: San Diego, New York City, Miami and Chicago and completed a range of cognitive exams roughly seven years apart. Researchers assessed cohort members' weight and potential cardiometabolic abnormality (having two or more of the following: high blood pressure, high blood sugar, high cholesterol and low HDL "good" cholesterol").

Ruling out factors like age, gender and education, the study found that while obesity alone did not predict whether someone might experience cognitive decline, cardiometabolic abnormality did. In fact, individuals with both obesity and heart problems performed much more poorly on cognitive testing than their peers with only obesity.

That's important, say researchers, because it could make way for an important prevention message, while helping to destigmatize obesity as a disease. "Obesity/fat stigma tends to put a hyper-focus on a number on the scale, sometimes at the expense of other health goals," said study author Ariana M. Stickel, PhD, a postdoctoral scholar in the Department of Neurosciences at the UC San Diego School of Medicine. But, she said, "If maintaining a specific weight is difficult, preventing or managing cardiometabolic abnormalities is just as important, if not more important from a cognitive health standpoint."

Study authors say they want to further investigate the relationship between weight, heart health and cognition, by, for example, researching how weight loss later in life might help prevent Alzheimer's disease and dementia among Latinos of all ages.

Currently, nearly 45% of Latino adults in the United States have obesity, according to the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Minority Health. To learn more, read "What are the health consequences of overweight and obesity?"

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