

Informal caregiving and markers of adiposity in the UK Household Longitudinal Study

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Background: Providing informal care is known to be associated with poorer psychological health. However less is known about other, more objective health outcomes, such as adiposity. The aim of this study was to investigate associations between being an informal caregiver with measures of adiposity using a large, representative UK longitudinal study.

Methods: Data on 20,669 participants of the UK Household Longitudinal Study were used to explore the relationship between caregiving and adiposity (body mass index (BMI), % body fat and waist circumference). We additionally investigated caregiving intensity (hours spent caregiving per week, number of people cared for and combining caregiving with paid work). Associations between caregiving and adiposity measures were tested using multivariable linear regressions. Analyses were stratified by gender and interactions with age were tested. Models adjusted for household income, educational attainment, social class, presence of a long-standing illness, number of dependent children in the household and partnership status.

Results: Informal caregiving was associated with increased adiposity for women but not men. Younger women caregivers (aged 16-44) had particularly higher levels of BMI, waist circumference and percentage body fat. With regards to caregiving intensity, men and women combining paid work and caregiving had higher levels of adiposity than caregivers who were not working. Also women who were caring for two or more people had higher adiposity than women caring for one person.

Conclusion: Our study suggests that providing informal care might be detrimental for health, and therefore this has important implications for society. Given funding cuts for social care, a greater proportion of the population will be expected to provide informal care for relatives and friends. Therefore the health of caregivers is a pressing public health concern.