Overweight when young is risk factor for bowel cancer

Being overweight when very young — even at birth — increases the risk of bowel cancer later in life. This finding comes from research by the Human Nutrition & Health postdoc Moniek van Zutphen.

'We already knew that overweight in adults is associated with bowel cancer. Now we wanted to know what the effect is of overweight in earlier phases in life,' she explains. She looked at research results from previous studies, analysed the relationship for various age categories and got a panel of experts to assess the strength of the evidence.

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Van Zutphen looked at the weight at birth and the life phases of toddler, child, teenager and young adult (ages 18 to 25). She found a clear linear association between the birthweight and the young adult BMI (weight relative to height) on the one hand and the risk of bowel cancer on the other hand. 'Every 1,000 grams over a birthweight of 3,000 grams increases the risk by nine per cent. In young adults with overweight, the risk increases by 12 per cent for every five BMI units above 18.5 kg/m^2,' says Van Zutphen. 'This confirms the importance of prevention from a young age.'

The Wageningen postdoc carried out the study for the World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF). An international panel assessed the strength of the evidence of her analyses. 'They found the evidence very strong.'

Starting point

Associate professor Dieuwertje Kok, who was closely involved in the research, makes a caveat. 'We see strong associations but we can't conclude from this data that being overweight when young directly causes bowel cancer. It could be that people who are overweight when young are also more likely to be overweight later in life. Or perhaps being overweight for long periods plays a role, or maybe hormones, genes or environmental factors cause both overweight and bowel cancer.'

Kok says the results are useful above all as a starting point for further investigations. She emphasizes that being overweight at some point isn't necessarily a problem. DV