

## **Heavy hitters: Obesity rate soars among professional baseball players**

UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. — Major League Baseball players have become overwhelmingly overweight and obese during the last quarter century, say health researchers.

David E. Conroy, Penn State professor of kinesiology, and colleagues looked at 145 years of data on professional baseball players' body mass. The researchers found that the athletes' weight held steady for over 100 years, with the majority of them weighing in at what is considered "normal"—or with a body mass index (BMI) between 18.5 and 24.9.

However, around 1991 the average player's BMI began to rise and over the last 25 years, nearly 80 percent of players fall into the overweight or obese category with a BMI above 25. Obesity in the general American population began to rise in the mid-1970s, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Research exists that shows how having extra weight can help with certain aspects of baseball," said Conroy, also professor of human development and family studies. "The more force a batter can put into the ball, the further it will travel."

The researchers used the Lahman Baseball Database, which is publicly available, where players' height, weight and age are recorded for their debut year in Major League Baseball. The data were self-reported, however Conroy points to the trend of players' increasing weight as informative—and concerning.

Conroy and colleagues report their findings in *Obesity Research and Clinical Practice*.

"The data are observational, and raise more questions than they answer," said Conroy. "BMI can be misleading, because it doesn't take body composition into account. What kind of pounds are the players adding? Are they mostly muscle or fat?"

The rise coincides with the steroid era, and steroids are known to cause weight gain in some. But the rise also lines up with advances in sports science and nutrition, which have enabled athletes to better train and fuel, helping them build muscle and endurance -- which could lead to weight gain as well.

“These trends warrant further attention because of the potential for adverse long-term health consequences in this population and those who perceive them as role models for health and human performance,” the researchers wrote.

Kathleen Y. Wolin, co-founder of Coeus Health, LLC, and Mercedes R. Carnethon, associate professor of preventive medicine, Northwestern University, also worked on this research.

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