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## **NewsWatch**

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### **Obese boomers face immobile future**

**By Nanci Hellmich**

Millions of overweight baby boomers are on the fast track to becoming disabled senior citizens, a possibility that could have dire repercussions for them and for the nation's already overburdened nursing home system, leading obesity and aging experts say.

"Obesity will have a big impact on increasing disability in this country in the coming years unless the epidemic can be halted and turned back," says Richard Suzman of the National Institute on Aging.

Public health officials have said for years that obesity increases the risk of diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, osteoarthritis and cancer. Now a growing body of research suggests that being obese — 30 or more pounds over a healthy weight — increases the chances of becoming disabled at a younger age and unable to perform tasks such as bathing or dressing.

The longer a person has been obese, the greater the wear on joints and the probability of developing type 2 diabetes, Suzman says. People who need joint replacements may have pain and disability for years before the surgery and for months afterward during recovery.

Experts are scrambling to head off the problem. The Obesity Society and the American Society for Nutrition recently called for obese older adults to lose weight to avoid becoming disabled. But boomers are at the crossroads of three trends:

- By 2030, after all baby boomers (born from 1946 to 1964) have turned 65, more than 71 million senior citizens will be living in the USA, the U.S. Census Bureau says.

- More Americans than ever are obese: one-third of the adult population, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- The number of disabilities among people in their 30s, 40s and 50s has risen dramatically over the past 20 years, according to a 2004 study by the Rand Corp. The new disability patients were more likely to have obesity-related illnesses, says Darius Lakdawalla, a Rand economist. Type 2 diabetes can lead to blindness, kidney failure, amputations, heart attacks and strokes.

This rise in disability is likely to increase future nursing home populations by 10% to 25% over current projections, Lakdawalla says.

But the nursing home system is stretched to the limit. There are 52,000 vacancies for certified nursing assistants in nursing facilities, says Susan Feeney of the American Health Care Association, a group that represents assisted-living and nursing facilities.

To handle obese and extremely obese people, nursing homes will need more staff and stronger help, says **Sharon Brangman**, a geriatrician in Syracuse, N.Y., and a board member of the **American Geriatrics Society**. "Just to get them in and out of bed can be a big job."