Coronavirus is particularly unkind to those who are obese

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A patient with respiratory problems is wheeled into a hospital. New research suggests that COVID-19 patients who are obese fare worse. (Andrew Caballero-Reynolds / AFP/Getty Images)

America's obesity epidemic appears to be making the coronavirus outbreak more dangerous — and potentially more deadly — in the United States, new research suggests. For younger and middle-aged adults in particular, carrying excess weight may significantly boost the likelihood of becoming severely ill with COVID-19.

The evidence for this comes from thousands of COVID-19 patients who sought treatment in emergency departments in New York, and it's prompting alarm among doctors and other health experts. In the U.S., 42.4% of adults have obesity, which means their body-mass index, or BMI, is 30 or more.
In one of two new studies released this week, COVID-19 patients who were younger than 60 and had a BMI between 30 and 34 were twice as likely as their non-obese peers to be admitted to the hospital for acute care instead of being sent home from the ER. They were also 1.8 times more likely to require critical care in a hospital's intensive care unit.

More severe obesity posed an even greater risk to COVID-19 patients in this under-60 age group. When these patients had a BMI of 35 or higher, they were 2.2 times more likely than their non-obese peers to need standard hospital care and 3.6 times more likely to end up in the ICU.

“Obesity appears to be a previously unrecognized risk factor for hospital admission and need for critical care,” wrote the authors of the study published this month in the journal Clinical Infectious Diseases. But that only applies to relatively younger patients; among those ages 65 and older, there was no link between obesity status and hospital care.

The authors, from New York University's Grossman School of Medicine, suggested that the country's high prevalence of obesity might be nudging rates of severe illness and death higher in the U.S. than in South Korea, China and Italy, where obesity rates are lower.

The results also give doctors a new way to predict which COVID-19 patients who are not yet senior citizens run a higher risk of hospitalization and critical illness.