More than 12 million adults in England will be obese by 2010

Adrian O'Dowd *London*

A third of men and more than a quarter of women will be obese by 2010, predicts the "most accurate estimate so far" of the future prevalence of obesity in England.

This will mean that more than 12 million adults and one million children will be obese in England within four years if nothing is done to reverse the trend, says a report published by the Department of Health last week.

The government's report on future obesity prevalence used the most recent data from the 2003-4 *Health Survey for England* together with other indicators. It found that the proportion of men becoming obese will be greater than the proportion of women.

The number of obese men in England is predicted to rise from 4.4 million in 2003 to 6.6 million in 2010. The number of obese women will rise from

4.8 million to 6.0 million over the same period.

Among children between the ages of 2 and 15 years it is expected that the number of obese girls will rise more steeply than the number of obese boys.

The report, which was commissioned by the health department and compiled by the National Centre for Social Research, also says that 25% of children who live in households in which both parents are obese or overweight will be obese. However, only 5% of children in households where neither parent is overweight or obese will be obese.

The forecast prevalence of obesity varied widely across regions. Among men it was predicted that the largest increase in obesity would occur in Yorkshire and the Humber, but among women the prevalence of obesity was predicted to fall in some regions, such as London and the South West.

The health secretary, Patricia Hewitt, said: "These days our health depends much more on what we do for ourselves than on what the NHS does for us. That's why each of us needs to think about how we can lead healthier lives."

"People need to want to change their lifestyles and take

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responsibility for their health, before they face problems in later life. Government and the NHS will support people in leading healthier lives, but ultimately it is each individual's choice that counts."

Colin Waine, chairman of the National Obesity Forum, said: "We are in danger of raising a generation whose life expectancy

will be less than ours. Direct action is needed or there will be a tremendous impact on the health service. Type 2 diabetes is rising at an alarming rate, and the reduction in cardiovascular disease deaths that we have seen could be halted and even reversed." □

Forecasting Obesity to 2010 is available at www.dh.gov.uk.

Waits for diagnostic tests threaten 18 week treatment target

Caroline White *London*

Patients at some hospitals in England are still enduring "unacceptable waits" for routine diagnostic services, such as scans and blood tests, says the health watchdog body the Healthcare Commission. Although some substantial improvements have been made, performance varies widely, it says.

Its review of radiology, pathology, and endoscopy services shows that just 16 of the 153 trusts surveyed achieved the highest rating of "excellent"—meaning that patients were kept waiting no longer than 13 weeks for diagnostic services—while 15 were awarded the lowest score of "weak." The remainder were rated as "good" or "fair" in equal measure.

The survey was carried out in September 2005 and will feed

into final performance ratings that are due to be published in October. The trusts were assessed for the first half of 2005-6 on 14 indicators covering quality, efficiency and management, and patients' experience.

The findings have prompted the commission to question whether the government target of a maximum wait by December 2008 of 18 weeks from referral by GP to treatment will be uniformly met.

All trusts will need to comply with the 13 week time frame for diagnosis by March next year if they are to meet the 18 week referral to treatment target, says the commission. In 67 trusts patients waited more than 26 weeks for imaging services, the review showed.

From the end of April 2007 government rules mean that patients waiting longer than 13 weeks for imaging scans, such as ultrasonography, will be allowed to choose an alternative healthcare provider for the service.

The assessment highlights major reductions in waiting times for computed tomography and magnetic resonance imaging, despite substantial increases in demand, and falls in very long waits for endoscopies.

But across the country waiting times for routine endoscopies ranged from two weeks to more than a year. And the commission warns that the current pace of improvement is too slow to cope with the expected surge in demand when the roll-out of the national bowel cancer screening programme is completed in 2009.

The review also found variation in the reporting of imaging results and in the turnaround times of many pathology tests, as well as widespread failure to

record the success rates for colonoscopies.

Describing the review "as a very fair assessment," Gill Morgan, chief executive of the NHS Confederation, which represents most NHS organisations, said: "There have been overall improvements, but it is clear that problems remain."

Gill Markham, vice president of the Royal College of Pathologists, agreed but added that new protocols and surgical targets had put heavy pressure on imaging services.

She said she was "hugely concerned" about the ability of trusts to meet the 18 week target, amid so many other priorities, especially when so many trusts were in financial difficulty.

But responding to the review the health minister Caroline Flint said: "We are confident the NHS will deliver the new target." □

The full results of the review of diagnostic services are available at www.healthcarecommission.org.uk.