LEAVING school is a high-risk period for weight gain, with the first large-scale national study of the problem showing obesity rates double in the short transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Weight gain accelerated after teenagers left school, the study of over 1500 young people found, with the proportion classified as overweight rising from 20 per cent in mid-adolescence to 33 per cent by the age of 24.

Obesity rose from 3.6 per cent to 6.7 per cent over the same period. Males were particularly at risk, with the rate of overweight males more than doubling from 18 per cent to 39 per cent.

Experts from Melbourne’s Murdoch Childrens Research Institute, who tracked participants over a 10-year period, said it was one of the first to focus on the period between adolescence and adulthood, with much previous work concentrating on childhood.

Lead author George Patton, of the Centre for Adolescent Health at the MCRI, said the findings showed the transition to adulthood was “a time of great risk” for developing weight problems.

“What we found was that during the mid to late teens, one in five were overweight, but by young adulthood this had grown to one in three,” Professor Patton said.

“Forty per cent of overweight 25-year-olds had never been overweight during their teens, and one in eight obese 25-year-olds had never been overweight prior to leaving school.

“There’s an onset of a whole lot of new weight problems in this transition.”

Professor Patton said while the study did not attempt to identify the causes for the weight gain, contributing factors probably included changes in lifestyles involved with moving into the workforce, leaving the parental home, changes in diet and reduction in sporting activities.

Entrenched weight problems were much harder to turn around, with none of the participants who were persistently obese during their teenage years getting back to a normal weight by the age of 25.

The study was published online by the Journal of Adolescent Health.

Louise Baur, director of the NSW Centre for Overweight and Obesity at the University of Sydney, said the study was an important contribution that “highlights the importance of early adulthood as a vital period for the promotion of healthy lifestyles”.

ADAM CRESSWELL
HEALTH EDITOR

‘There’s an onset of a whole lot of new weight problems’