

Adults living with children eat more fat than do other adults

December 30 2006

Adults living with children eat more saturated fat -- the equivalent of nearly an entire frozen pepperoni pizza each week -- than do adults who do not live with children, according to a University of Iowa and University of Michigan Health System study.

The finding was based on data from the federal government's National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey III. The UI-led study was made public today, and the paper will appear in the Jan. 4, 2007, online edition of the *Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine*.

Most family diet studies have examined how adults influence children's eating habits, but few studies have considered how children or their habits may be associated with adults' food intake, said Helena Laroche, M.D., an associate in internal medicine and pediatrics at the University of Iowa Roy J. and Lucille A. Carver College of Medicine and the study's primary author.

"The analysis shows that adults' fat intake, particularly saturated fat, is higher for those who live with children compared to adults who don't live with children," Laroche said.

"The study doesn't prove that the presence of children causes adults to eat more fat; people living with children may have different eating habits for many reasons. However, an important implication of the study is that healthy changes in eating need to focus on the entire household, not just individuals. Health care professionals must also help families find ways

to fit healthy foods into their busy lifestyles," she added.

Laroche and colleagues at the University of Michigan Health System, including Matthew Davis, M.D., assistant professor of pediatrics, analyzed questionnaires given to 6,600 adults ages 17 to 65 living with and without children under age 17. Compared to other studies, the participants represented a more diverse racial, ethnic and economic population. Trained nutritionists asked detailed questions about what individuals and family members had eaten in the previous 24 hours and how frequently they ate high-fat foods.

Compared to adults living without children, adults living with children ate an additional 4.9 grams of fat daily, including 1.7 grams of saturated fat. Saturated fat is linked to heart disease. Adults with children in the home were also more likely to eat foods such as cheese, ice cream, beef, pizza and salty snacks.

"Adults with children in the home ate more of those snacks and other foods that we considered convenience foods," Laroche said. "These dietary choices may be due to time pressures, advertising aimed at children that also includes adults, or adults' perception that children will eat only hot dogs or macaroni and cheese. Once these foods are in the house, even if bought for the children, adults appear more likely to eat them."

Laroche cautioned that these potential reasons why adults with children at home eat more fat require additional research to see if they are actual causes. She also said a limitation of the study was that the data did not indicate which homes included parents and which included adult older siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents or other adults.

"We also could not determine whether there are differences between homes with younger children, ages 2 to 7, compared to homes with older

children, especially teenagers," said Laroche, who plans to further study adults' diets.

Laroche encourages her patients to think about what they eat, particularly snacks. Tips she often shares include:

- Choose popcorn or low-salt pretzels over high-fat potato chips.
- Children age 2 or older can be given lower fat, instead of whole, milk.
- Avoid cooking in butter, lard or solid stick margarine to decrease your intake of saturated fats; try baking or cooking in olive oil.
- Limit the amount of fast food and pizza you eat to once a week or less. If this is not possible look for lower fat items on the menu and limit the amount that you eat.

Laroche also said these Web sites provide healthy food information:

- American Heart Association, www.americanheart.org
- American Academy of Pediatrics, www.aap.org/healthtopics/nutrition.cfm
- United States Department of Agriculture, www.usda.gov (click on the "Food and Nutrition" section)

As with all health care, it is best to consult your personal physician before making any changes to health care routine.

Source: University of Iowa

Citation: Adults living with children eat more fat than do other adults (2006, December 30)
retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2006-12-adults-children-fat.html>

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