

Chronic ear infections linked to increased obesity risk

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Ear infections are a painful rite of passage for many children. New research suggests the damage caused by chronic ear infections could be linked to people's preference for fatty foods, which increases their risk of being overweight as they age. Scientists from around the country presented their findings on this unexpected connection at the American Psychological Association's 116th Annual Convention here Thursday.

"Middle ear infection is a common childhood disease and obesity is a growing problem worldwide," said Linda Bartoshuk, PhD, of the University of Florida College of Dentistry. "Any potential association between these two public health issues is of considerable interest." Bartoshuk presented some preliminary findings that a strong link between localized taste damage from chronic middle ear infections, or otitis media, and an increased preference for high-fat foods.

A series of studies address this issue. In one, 6,584 people who attended a lecture series responded to a series of health questions that determined their history of middle ear infections and their body mass index (BMI). The participants, mostly academics, were between 16 and 92 years old. The findings showed that those with a moderate to severe history of otitis media were 62 percent more likely to be obese. Bartoshuk noted that the overall rate of obesity in this sample was less than the general population.

John Hayes, PhD, of Brown University and his collaborators at the University of Connecticut, found associations between otitis media

exposure, taste, food choice and obesity. Among middle-aged women, those with taste functioning consistent with taste nerve damage preferred sweet and high fat foods more and were more likely to have larger waists. In another study, they found preschoolers with a severe history of ear infections ate fewer vegetables and more sweets and tended to be heavier. "This suggests that taste damage from ear infections may alter food choice and thus lead to obesity risk." said Hayes.

Scientists are also looking at the possibility that damage to other taste nerves may also be associated with weight gain. Having the tonsils removed also appears to have an effect on whether a child will be overweight. Epidemiologist Howard Hoffman, MA, in a re-examination of the National Health Examination survey, which was conducted in the 1960s, found that 13,887 children ages 6 to 17 who had had their tonsils removed were at an increased risk for being overweight. The recent analysis showed younger children, ages 6 to 11, who had had tonsillectomies were 40 percent more likely to be overweight at the time of the survey.

Another finding was that teen girls who had had their tonsils removed were 30 percent more likely to be overweight. Hoffman said tonsillectomies were a common treatment for chronic ear infections during the period of this survey. "This data suggests that there are lingering effects of tonsillectomies on taste nerves and that can affect eating habits," said Hoffman.

Epidemiologist Kathleen Daly, PhD, of the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, also spoke about recent findings that showed ear infections treated with tubes can also lead to higher BMIs in toddlers. "Obesity has doubled over the past 20 years among preschool children. The more data we collect on what contributes to this major public health problem, the greater likelihood that we can help prevent it," said Daly.

Source: American Psychological Association

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