

Study shows family lifestyles influence adolescents' weight

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A new Penn State study shows that family lifestyle has a significant impact on teenagers' weight. Children are heavier if their families skip or miss some meals, such as breakfast, or if their families watch TV or play video games for several hours a day. This is true regardless of the teenager's genetic risk of being overweight.

The study, published in a special issue of the American Journal of Sociology on social factors and genetics, is the first to demonstrate that the link between parents' obesity and the weight of their children is both social and genetic in origin.

"Weight trends within families are not just genetic – they're social as well," says Molly Martin, assistant professor of sociology and demography at Penn State. "Family members share lifestyles. They don't just behave independently. What families do and don't do together – how active they are and whether they eat regular meals – strongly affect the weight of children growing up in those families."

Martin acknowledges that genetics also play an important role in determining an adolescent's weight. "However, families can't do anything about their genetic makeup," she says. "They may be able to modify their lifestyles, though. That can be a tough challenge in today's hectic environment, but families with more resources are better able to carve out a healthy lifestyle and maintain a healthy weight. The one change that would make the biggest impact would be ensuring that children eat three square meals a day and that they are not missing meals

because of financial constraints or as part of an ill-informed attempt to lose weight.”

For her study, Martin analyzed sibling data – including data on twins, other full siblings, and half siblings – from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative school-based sample of children in grades seven through twelve. Although the data are from 1994 to 1996, Martin says that the age of the data should not affect the patterns she uncovered.

Funding for the research was provided by the National Center for Child Health and Human Development and the University of Wisconsin-Madison Health & Society Research Competition.

A former Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health & Society Scholar, Martin will turn her attention next to study how the gender composition of the family affects family lifestyles and their association with teenagers’ weight.

Provided by Penn State

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