

Chaotic Households Contribute to Mothers' Obesity

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Putting food on the table, struggling with unemployment and meeting the relentless needs of young children all contribute to household stress. Now, a new study finds that these pressures also increase the possibility that a mother will be obese.

Although mothers' weight increases along with household instability, their young children's weight does not, according to lead author Earle Chambers, Ph.D. The study of urban mothers appears in the February issue of the *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*.

While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports 32 percent of all Americans are obese, 41 percent of mothers were obese in this study. Thirty-eight percent of mothers in low-instability households were obese, while nearly 48 percent in high-instability households were obese.

The researchers rated household instability by taking into account parental stress (for instance, whether mothers felt alone or trapped by their responsibilities), financial instability and ability to keep food on the table. The average age of the mothers was 28, and 40 percent of children did not have a father in the house.

“My interest is to look at the intersection between the home environment and the neighborhood environment and see how those intersections influence obesity,” Chambers said. Access to healthy places to eat and exercise space can make a difference, he added.

At the time of the study, Chambers was working with the St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center, New York Obesity Research Center. He is now an assistant professor at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine of Yeshiva University.

The study used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a national survey of children born in 20 large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000. The authors focused on 1,449 mothers in the study whose weight and height were included.

The results did not surprise Adam Drewnowski, director of the University of Washington Center for Obesity Research in Seattle. "There will be wide variability by area, but based on our analyses of data from California and from New York, every additional 10 percent in poverty rates translates into another 6 percent rise in obesity rates," he said. "So if these were lower-income mothers, this is exactly what you would expect."

The study did not show that stress factors affecting parents put children (mostly 3-year olds) at risk for obesity. Chambers did not have data to investigate why this was, but added, "A mother prioritizes her needs well below the needs of her child," he said. "Some of that is playing a part here."

On the web:

http://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_health_care_for_the_poor_and_underserved/

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