

Eat, drink and be merry? Study says junk food makes kids fatter, but happier

April 14 2009

Fast food and soft drinks may be making children fatter but they also make them happy. Programs aimed at tackling childhood obesity, by reducing children's consumption of unhealthy food and drink, are likely to be more effective if they also actively seek to keep children happy in other ways, according to Professor Hung-Hao Chang from National Taiwan University and Professor Rodolfo Nayga from the University of Arkansas in the US. Their findings are published in Springer's *Journal of Happiness Studies*.

Childhood obesity is a major public health issue worldwide. It is well accepted that unhealthy eating patterns are partly responsible for the increase in [childhood obesity](#). However, very little is known about the relationship between fast food and soft drink consumption and children's happiness.

For the first time, Chang and Nayga looked at the relationship between unhealthy dietary habits and children's psychological health. In particular, they studied the effects of fast food and soft drink consumption on children's [body weight](#) and unhappiness. Using data from the National Health Interview Survey in Taiwan - a nationwide survey carried out in 2001 - the authors looked at the fast food and soft drink consumption, body weight and level of happiness of 2,366 children aged between 2 and 12 years old. Fast food included French fries, pizza and hamburgers; soft drinks included soda and other sugar-sweetened beverages.

A quarter of the children in the survey sample were overweight or obese and approximately 19 percent sometimes or often felt unhappy, sad or depressed. The study's key finding was that children who ate fast food and drank soft drinks were more likely to be overweight, but they were also less likely to be unhappy. The authors' analysis also highlighted a number of factors influencing children's body weight, eating patterns and happiness. For example, mothers' consumption of fast food and soft drinks predicted her child's eating habits. Those children who ate fast food were more likely to also consume soft drinks. [Children](#) from lower income households were more likely to have unhealthy [dietary habits](#) and be overweight or obese.

The authors conclude: "Our findings suggest that consumption of [fast food](#) and [soft drinks](#) can result in a trade-off between children's objective (i.e. obesity) and subjective (i.e. unhappiness) well-being. Policies and programs that aim to improve children's overall health should take these effects on children's objective and subjective well-being into account to facilitate the reduction in childhood obesity without sacrificing children's degree of happiness."

Source: Springer

Citation: Eat, drink and be merry? Study says junk food makes kids fatter, but happier (2009, April 14) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-04-merry-junk-food-kids-fatter.html>

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