

Research on Childhood Obesity May Help Fight Epidemic

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Kids' fast-food meals that included low-fat milk had a better chance of meeting the nutritional standards of the National School Lunch Program than meals having a sweetened beverage, such as a soda.

(PhysOrg.com) -- More than 16 percent of children and adolescents in the United States are overweight—a doubling of the estimated incidence of overweight among children and a tripling of the rate among adolescents in the past two decades. But scientists funded by the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and based at the ARS Children's Nutrition Research Center (CNRC) at Baylor College of Medicine (BCM) in Houston, Texas, are fighting back.

The researchers' investigations may lead to new, cost-effective strategies to help America's kids make healthier [food choices](#), manage their weight, and set and achieve fitness goals.

Among these researchers is Jason A. Mendoza, a pediatrician and assistant professor of pediatrics at BCM. In one early investigation, reported in 2008, Mendoza, study leader and economist Sharon I. O' Donnell and colleagues scrutinized the nutritional quality of kid-oriented "combo" [meals](#) offered at 10 well-known regional or national [fast-food restaurant](#) chains in Houston.

According to the scientists, only 3 percent of the kids' meals met seven key standards set by the National School Lunch Program for meals intended for children in kindergarten through third grade. Best-choice meals featured a deli-style sandwich combined with a fruit or a veggie that wasn't fried, and low-fat milk as the beverage. Also making the grade: a kids' meal that featured a plain hamburger, fruit as a side, and low-fat milk.

There's another way to look at the combo meals' report card: [dietary energy](#) density, calculated by dividing the total number of calories by the serving's weight in grams. The average energy density of the fast-food meals that did not meet the School Lunch standards was 2.3 calories per gram, compared with only 1.5 calories per gram for the meals that met the standards.

[Read more](#) about this research in the October 2009 issue of *Agricultural Research* magazine.

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