

Getting a 'Head Start' on obesity prevention

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Almost 1 million preschool children from low-income families are enrolled in Head Start, a national program for young children that readies them for school. While the program provides them with educational and social skill enhancement, a study authored by Temple University researchers finds that it also goes above and beyond the current federal recommendations for promoting healthy eating and exercise habits among this group of children who are at high risk for obesity.

For the study, published in the December issue of the [Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine](#), researchers surveyed all Head Start programs in the country about practices related to healthy eating and physical activity.

Across the 1583 Head Start programs surveyed, researchers found:

- Seventy percent of programs were serving only non-fat or 1 percent milk, and 59 percent never served chocolate milk.
- Three-quarters of programs reported having children participate in at least 30 minutes of adult-led physical activity per day.
- Ninety-four percent of programs reported serving some vegetable every day, other than French fries.
- Ninety-seven percent reported serving some fruit every day,

other than 100% fruit juice.

- More than half (56 percent) provided children with at least 60 minutes each day of unstructured physical activity in addition to the 30 minutes of adult-led physical activity.

"The [obesity epidemic](#) has reached even the youngest children, and many Head Start programs say they are trying to address this problem with practices that go beyond what is required by federal regulation," said Robert Whitaker, the lead author of the study. "Some of these regulations might need to be updated, but we still know very little about what challenges programs are facing when they try to put [obesity prevention](#) practices in place and maintain them."

In addition, he says new guidelines could help prevent obesity in children outside Head Start as well.

"Early childhood education and childcare programs throughout the nation have traditionally looked to the Head Start regulations to set their own standards," said Whitaker, a professor of pediatrics and public health at the Center for [Obesity](#) Research and Education.

Source: Temple University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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