

Mothers' diets have biggest influence on children eating healthy

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As health professionals search for ways to combat the rise in obesity and promote healthy eating, new research reveals a mother's own eating habits – and whether she views her child as a 'picky eater' – has a huge impact on whether her child consumes enough fruits and vegetables.

A study by professor Mildred Horodynski of Michigan State University's College of Nursing looked at nearly 400 low-income women (black and non-Hispanic white) with [children](#) ages 1-3 enrolled in Early Head Start programs. Results show toddlers were less likely to consume fruits and vegetables four or more times a week if their mothers did not consume that amount or if their mothers viewed their children as picky eaters.

"What and how mothers eat is the most direct influence on what toddlers eat," Horodynski said. "Health professionals need to consider this when developing strategies to increase a child's consumption of healthy foods. Diets low in fruit and vegetables even at young ages pose increased risks for chronic diseases later in life."

The research was published recently in the journal *Public Health Nursing*.

When mothers viewed their children as picky eaters – unwilling to try unfamiliar foods – a decrease also was seen in the amount of fruits and vegetables consumed.

"Perceptions of a toddler as a picky eater may be related to parenting

style or culture," Horodynski said. "Mothers who viewed their children as picky eaters may be more lax in encouraging the consumption of fruits and vegetables."

Previous research shows that early repeated exposure to different types of foods is needed; up to 15 exposures may be needed before it can be determined if a child likes or dislikes a food.

Horodynski's study, which collected information from mothers from 28 Michigan counties, also revealed differences among race: Black [mothers](#) and toddlers did not consume as much fruits and vegetables as non-Hispanic whites, though a majority of all study subjects fell below recommended U.S. dietary guidelines.

"Special attention must be given to family-based approaches to incorporating fruits and [vegetables](#) into daily [eating habits](#)," she said. "Efforts to increase mothers' [fruit](#) and vegetable intake would result in more positive role modeling."

In addition, Horodynski said, public health nurses and other health professionals must play an important role in enhancing mothers' awareness of the importance of health eating.

"Mother needs to have the knowledge and confidence to make these healthy decisions for their children," she said.

Provided by Michigan State University

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