

# Too close for comfort? Maybe not

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People generally worry about who their neighbors are, especially neighbors of our children. If high-fat food and soda are nearby, people will imbibe, and consequently gain weight. Or will they? With students' health at risk, a study in the July/August 2011 issue of the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* explores the influence food store locations near schools has on the student risk of being overweight and student fast-food and sweetened beverage consumption.

Investigators from the University of Southern Maine surveyed 552 students at 11 Maine high schools to determine height, weight, and calorie-dense [food consumption](#) of ninth through twelfth grade students. Findings from the study reveal that half of the students consumed soda at least once a week and just over 10% consumed it daily, with a slightly smaller number consuming [sports drinks](#) in these time periods. In addition, nearly two thirds had visited a burger and fries [fast food restaurant](#) in the previous month, whereas over half had visited a pizza parlor during that period. Of the 552 students surveyed, one quarter of students were overweight (12.7%) or obese (12.5%), whereas 73% were of normal weight and 1.8% were underweight.

Surprisingly, this study found no correlation between students' overweight risk and the presence of stores with unhealthful food choices near their schools. Dr. David E. Harris, Professor at University of Southern Maine, states, "This study reports that the consumption of sweetened drinks and fast food among Maine high school students is high. One-half consumed sweetened soda weekly, and over two-thirds consumed fast food monthly, and students access these food items at a

myriad of different locations. However, the proximity or density of stores with unhealthful food near Maine high schools does not predict the risk of overweight for students at these schools. This finding suggests that high school nutrition programs that focus on student behavior may be more effective than programs that focus on the built food environment near the school, at least in a predominantly nonurban setting such as Maine."

This study documents the importance of identifying determinants that influence adolescents' risk of being overweight. The researchers emphasize that "until unhealthful [food choices](#) are reduced overall, it is not surprising that the presence of food stores near their schools has little impact on students' risk of being overweight."

**More information:** The article is "Location of Food Stores Near Schools Does Not Predict the Weight Status of Maine High School Students" by David E. Harris, PhD; Janet Whatley Blum, ScD; Matthew Bampton, PhD; Liam M. O'Brien, PhD; Christina M. Beaudoin, PhD; Michele Polacsek, PhD; Karen A. O'Rourke, MPH. It appears in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, Volume 43, Issue 4 (July/August 2011)

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