

Obese girls more than twice as likely to be addicted to smoking

June 21 2011, By Laura Kennedy

Obese teenage girls are more than twice as likely as other girls to develop high-level nicotine addiction as young adults, according to a new study. Nearly 20 percent of American adolescents currently are obese, the authors note.

Smoking is just one of the problematic behaviors that appeal to some teens, along with delinquency, [drug use](#), alcohol use and early or unprotected [sexual activity](#). Some of the risk factors that could lead teens to engage in these behaviors include [low self-esteem](#), depression and poor academic performance. Obese [teenage girls](#) in the study were more likely to report each of these risk factors.

“As we address the issue of obesity, it is important to prevent poor medical outcomes, but we must also recognize the risk for these psychosocial outcomes and support and counsel teens appropriately,” said lead author Aliya Esmail Hussaini, M.D., of the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation in Austin, Texas.

The study appears online in the Journal of Adolescent Health. The authors analyzed data from a group of more than 4,000 U.S. adolescent girls who responded to three waves of surveys over a six-year period. The findings regarding obesity and nicotine addiction held true regardless of socioeconomic status, age, race, parental smoking and many other factors.

The surveys included a six-question section designed to assess [nicotine](#)

dependence and the authors described the highest scores as “high-level [nicotine addiction](#).”

This description might suggest someone similar to “a heroin addict in the last stage of desperation,” said Dr. Richard Jessor, Ph.D., director of the Health and Society Research Program at the University of Colorado-Boulder Institute of Behavioral Science. Jessor, who has no affiliation with the study, said he believes that a more moderate term such as “heavy smoker” would be more appropriate.

It is also important to point out that obesity might not be a stand-alone risk factor for heavy smoking, Jessor said. Instead, similar psychosocial risk factors might lead to a “syndrome” of problem behaviors that includes both obesity and heavy smoking.

Regardless of the exact nature of the correlation, Hussaini and Jessor agree that it is critical for parents to model positive behaviors by not smoking, engaging in healthy eating and physical activity, and promoting commitment to school.

While preparing the study, Hussaini received support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through the Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars Program at the University of Pennsylvania.

More information: Hussaini AE, et al. Alcoholic beverage preferences and associated drinking patterns and risk behaviors among high school youth. *J Adolesc Health* online, 2011.

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