

Obese teens have fewer friends, especially whites

July 25 2012, By Milly Dawson



Obese adolescents tend to have fewer friends at school than their peers, finds a new study in *Ethnicity & Disease*. However, the impact of obesity on friendships varies by ethnic group, with White students faring worse than Black or Hispanic students.

The research team used data drawn from the [school](#)-based National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. The team's sample comprised 15,355 [adolescents](#) in grades 7 through 12. Each student was asked to list

up to five same-sex friends from within school or outside of school. By linking students' responses, the researchers could determine when students who listed a certain peer as a friend were in turn listed by that peer as a friend. This information was used to assess "social integration."

"We found that obese adolescents were picked as friends by only 3 schoolmates, compared to the average adolescent who was not obese, who was identified as a friend by 5 schoolmates," said lead author Solveig Argeseanu Cunningham, Ph.D., of the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University. She explained that despite interest in long-term health consequences of childhood [obesity](#), youngsters' main concerns are actually psychosocial. "Kids' immediate concerns revolve around self-esteem, depression and opportunities to engage with others," she said.

Obese teens did not report having fewer friends than their normal weight peers. Differences only emerged in whether the friendship was reciprocated. Being obese had the greatest effects on the reciprocity of white teens' friendships. For non-white teens, especially Black girls, being obese did not reduce their number of school [friends](#). One explanation could be the different ideals of beauty among different ethnic groups, with African-American and some Hispanic cultures being more accepting of larger bodies, offered Cunningham. These findings matter, she added, because during adolescence, [peers](#) are more influential than family in shaping a person's self-image, relationships and behavior, including their health behavior choices.

Michelle Gourdine, M.D. and author on African-American health issues pointed to the need for more study in order for these findings to help physicians, whose aim is to motivate teenage patients to lose weight. In addition, Gourdine noted that "further research could address whether either intra-racial or interracial friendships, or both or neither, would exert enough 'peer pressure' to influence an obese teenager to adopt

healthy behaviors.”

More information: Solveig Argeseanu Cunningham, et al. (2012). Race, ethnicity, and the relevance of obesity for social integration, *Ethnicity & Disease*, Volume 22, Summer 2012.

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