

Amish children are 2 times more physically active than non-Amish children

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Old Order Amish children are much more physically active and three times less likely to be overweight than non-Amish children, which may provide them with some long-term protection against developing Type 2 diabetes, University of Maryland School of Medicine researchers report in the journal *Diabetes Care*.

The researchers found that Amish children in Lancaster County, Pa., spent an additional 34 minutes a day in light [physical activity](#), plus another 53 additional minutes a day in moderate to [vigorous activity](#) compared to non-Amish white children living nearby on Maryland's rural Eastern Shore. The amount of moderate to vigorous activity, which is important to [cardiovascular health](#), was twice that of the non-Amish children. The level of physical activity was inversely correlated to their BMI, or body mass index, which is a measurement of body fat based on a person's height and weight.

"We know from our earlier research that Amish adults are just as overweight as non-Amish Americans of European origin, but they have half the incidence of Type 2 diabetes," says Soren Snitker, M.D., Ph.D., the study's senior author and an associate professor of medicine and pediatrics at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. "This study suggests that the Amish gain their [excess weight](#) relatively late in life, which may decrease their long-term risk of developing the disease." The number of years someone is obese is a risk factor for diabetes, irrespective of the person's age and current BMI.

Higher levels of physical activity and lower BMI are both protective against diabetes, Dr. Snitker says. Obesity is a major risk factor for Type 2 diabetes.

Dr. Snitker says that while it is unrealistic to imagine that the general public will adopt the Amish lifestyle in its entirety, the study results underscore the need for parents to encourage their children to be more physically active. "We may be able to learn something from the attitudes of the Amish," he says. "Whether children are physically active or not depends a lot on choices their parents make. Do they facilitate physically demanding activities for their children or do they allow them to spend long hours playing electronic games or watching television?"

E. Albert Reece, M.D., Ph.D., M.B.A., vice president for medical affairs at the University of Maryland and the John Z. and Akiko K. Bowers Distinguished Professor and dean of the University of Maryland School of Medicine, says, "As America's children become increasingly overweight, they become more vulnerable to diseases such as [Type 2 diabetes](#). The incidence of diabetes among our young people is rising at an alarming rate. This study by Dr. Snitker and his colleagues offers clear evidence of the benefits of exercise and maintaining a healthy body weight as reflected in the [body mass index](#) calculation."

The Old Order Amish in Lancaster County, Pa., trace their ancestry back 14 generations to a small group of Anabaptist Christians who came to Pennsylvania from Europe in the mid-1700s. They don't drive cars or have electricity in their homes and eschew many of the trappings of modern life.

The researchers compared data from 270 Old Order Amish children, ages 8 to 19, from Lancaster County and 229 children from Maryland's Eastern Shore. They measured the children's physical activity by having them wear a device to track their body movement, which allowed them

to calculate how much energy they burned as a result of their activity.

Typical Amish children's activities include walking to school, playing with their friends, and performing chores.

"The Amish lifestyle affects the whole family, involving Old Order Amish (OOA) children in household or farming chores from an early age," the researchers note. "OOA children also seem to spend a substantial amount of time in outdoor play with their siblings and neighbors, facilitated by the large size of the OOA Amish nuclear family. OOA children do not use computers or electronic games, nor do they watch television. OOA children attend one-room school houses and almost always go outside for recess. Even the youngest OOA students use active transportation to get to school, generally walking in a group."

By comparison, non-Amish [children](#) "almost universally" travel to school and other destinations by bus or car, the researchers say.

Provided by University of Maryland

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