

Young Britons 'getting the message' on obesity, expert says

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Obesity rates in young people in Britain appear to be going into reverse, a top gathering of health officials heard Monday, as the message on the risks of being overweight seems to be getting through.

Presenting research on obesity in Britain, Klim McPherson from Oxford University told the World Health Summit in Berlin that people aged 16 to 29 had generally tended to be less overweight or obese in recent years.

Among people aged 30 to 44, the trend was flat, he said, but in general "these people are getting control of their weight."

"The evidence is that the message is getting through to young people in the UK," McPherson told AFP.

He said younger people tended to exercise more and noted that high-profile campaigns on [healthy eating](#) by celebrity chefs such as Jamie Oliver also had an impact.

Nevertheless, he stressed the data referred only to Britain and he had little evidence to suggest the trend was replicated in other countries.

Indeed, another expert, Shiriki Kumanyika from the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, pointed to data from the United States showing how food portions had ballooned in the past 70 years.

"[Soft drinks](#) have increased by a factor of six, hamburgers by a factor of

three and [french fries](#) by a factor of three since 1950. Take two people to dinner when you go to the States, you'll have enough to eat," she quipped.

The result has been that the average American is 11 kilogrammes heavier in 2004 than in 1980, she said.

Studies have also shown that in most advanced countries, obesity is rising because people are eating more and exercising less , she said.

Experts stressed the importance of educating children about healthy eating, with Charlotte Cole from Sesame Workshop presenting data from studies showing how the popular Sesame Street characters could be used to powerful effect.

She said a group of children were given a choice between broccoli and sweets. Unsurprisingly, 78 percent chose the sweets.

But when the Elmo character from Sesame Street expressed a preference for broccoli, the proportion changed to 50-50, she said.

When Elmo campaigned for the sweets, nearly nine out of 10 of the children plumped for it, she noted.

As [Sesame Street](#) has tried to do its bit to improve children's health, some of the characters have changed their habits, she said.

"Cookie Monster is still obsessed with cookies, but he actually eats quite a lot of vegetables now," she said.

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