

US childhood obesity dips for first time in decades

December 27 2012, by Mira Oberman

Obesity rates among small children may finally be on the decline after more than tripling in the United States the past 30 years, a study out Wednesday indicated.

The study found that [obesity](#) rates peaked in 2004 and then declined slightly among low-income [children](#) aged two to four who receive benefits from a federal food stamp program called SNAP.

"To our knowledge, this is the first national study to show that the [prevalence of obesity](#) and extreme obesity among young US children may have begun to decline," wrote lead author Liping Pan of the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC).

"The results of this study indicate modest recent progress of obesity prevention among young children. These findings may have important health implications because of the lifelong health risks of obesity and extreme obesity in early childhood."

Obesity is most prevalent among minority and low-income families and has been associated with a range of health problems and premature death.

The researchers analyzed data from a [pediatric nutrition](#) surveillance system which monitors almost half of the children eligible for federally funded [maternal and child health](#) and nutrition programs.

They were able to access height and weight data from 27.5 million children aged two to four in the 30 states which consistently reported their data.

In 1998, obesity levels were at 13.05 percent of the children. This rose to a peak of 15.36 percent in 2004 before declining to 14.94 percent in 2010.

Extreme obesity rates rose from 1.75 percent in 1998 to a peak of 2.22 percent in 2003 before slipping down to 2.07 percent in 2010, the study published in the [Journal of the American Medical Association](#) found.

In an accompanying editorial, Dr. David Ludwig said the declines seen are not enough, and he urged an overhaul of the federal food stamp program (SNAP) to help low-income families tackle obesity by eliminating junk food and adding more fruit and vegetables to their diet.

"SNAP is essential for hunger prevention in the United States, but its exclusive focus on food quantity contributes to malnutrition and obesity, and is misaligned with the goal of helping beneficiaries lead healthier lives," wrote Ludwig, who works in an [obesity prevention](#) center at Boston Children's Hospital.

While other federal food programs, like the free meals offered in schools, have been revised to focus on healthful eating, SNAP has no regulations to influence the quality of food purchased.

Ludwig noted that it pays for an estimated \$4 billion in soft drinks per year, which adds up to about 20 million servings of soda a day.

"The public pays for sugary drinks, candy, and other junk foods included in SNAP benefits twice: once at the time of purchase, and later for the treatment of diet-induced disease through Medicaid and Medicare," he

wrote.

"The nation's \$75 billion investment in SNAP could provide a major opportunity to reduce the burden of diet-related disease among low-income children and families if policies that promote nutritional quality are instituted."

More than a third of US children were overweight in 2008, the CDC found in a previous study.

Childhood [obesity rates](#) jumped from seven percent of children aged six to 11 in 1980 to 20 percent in 2008. The number of obese teens aged 12 to 19 jumped from five percent to 18 percent over the same period.

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Citation: US childhood obesity dips for first time in decades (2012, December 27) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-12-childhood-obesity-dips-decades.html>

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