

Research finds promising approaches to prevent Latino childhood obesity

February 15 2013

Guided grocery store trips, menu labeling at restaurants, community gardens, and video-game-based exercise programs are among several promising, culturally appropriate ways to prevent obesity among Latino children, according to a new collection of studies from Salud America! The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Research Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children published in a supplement to the March issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

Salud America! is a national network of researchers, advocates, and policymakers established in 2007 that seeks environmental and policy solutions to Latino [childhood obesity](#), an American epidemic.

The supplement focuses on Salud America! achievements over the past five years, including 19 papers of groundbreaking research. It also features three commentaries authored by a range of political and medical leaders—such as San Antonio Mayor Julián Castro and Harvey V. Fineberg, President of the Institute of Medicine.

Each paper considers the context of Latino culture, health conditions, and/or policies in places where [Latino children](#) and families live, work, learn, play, and pray.

"This supplement is the culmination of several years of diligence, passion, and hard work in identifying and examining the most promising policy-relevant strategies to reduce and prevent obesity among Latino children," say supplement editors Amelie G. Ramirez, DrPH, MPH,

director of Salud America! and the Institute for Health Promotion Research at The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, and Guadalupe X. Ayala, PhD, MPH, of the Division of Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences in the Graduate School of Public Health at San Diego State University. "In addition to fueling new research findings, Salud America! helped to increase the skills and experience of researchers working in the field, and further expand the national Salud America! research network. The ranks of those working to reverse the country's [obesity epidemic](#) are getting stronger each day."

In the United States, Latinos are currently the most populous and fastest-growing ethnic minority. About 44 percent of Latino boys and 38 percent of Latino girls are either overweight or obese, compared with an average rate of 31 percent. Children who are overweight or obese are more likely to remain so later in life, which can put them at greater risk for long-term health conditions, such as high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and some forms of cancer.

The supplement presents Salud America! studies that sought effective approaches for preventing and controlling obesity among Latino children. The studies represent work conducted in eleven states and a variety of participants, research methodologies, and outcomes.

Within the Latino community, studies concluded that:

- Owners of small, independent restaurants can improve access to healthy menu options and continue to publish calorie information on their menus
- Tending community gardens or attending nutrition and cooking workshops improved or maintained children's body mass indices and increased the presence of fruits and vegetables in the home
- Capitalizing on the interconnectedness of one's faith and health, religious communities can serve as conduits for obesity

prevention programs that offer faith-oriented cooking classes, health education, and physical activity opportunities

- A child's participation in an afterschool fitness program can increase the likelihood of subsequent fitness over a two-year period
- Barriers related to transportation, language, and school communication can negatively affect families' physical activity
- Policy development and environmental change are possible to stimulate physical activity, based on a study administered within the United States – Mexico border colonias

Within schools, a team of investigators concluded that using active video games can increase cardiorespiratory endurance and math scores over time among Latino students.

Within the Latino family, studies focused on the effectiveness of a variety of interventions:

- An intervention involving nutrition education about food selection and a guided trip to the grocery store resulted in a decrease in the total number of calories per dollar spent, challenging the common perception that purchasing healthy foods costs more money
- A summertime intervention of parental training and guidance to support healthy lifestyle choices among mothers, combined with a program of exercise, nutrition education, and behavioral counseling for their daughters, produced a significant reduction in the percentage of body fat and waist circumference for the girls
- Among migrant workers, parents were not as concerned about overweight children as they were obese children, indicating the need for more community education and prevention programs

In his commentary, George R. Flores, MD, MPH, asserts, "Research represented in the Salud America! supplement is noteworthy because it represents good science and new information about a population and problem that deserve much greater attention, was produced with a minimum of resources, and provided opportunities for professional growth to a number of early career scientists. For its foresight and support of Salud America!, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation merits acclaim."

Provided by Elsevier

Citation: Research finds promising approaches to prevent Latino childhood obesity (2013, February 15) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-02-approaches-latino-childhood-obesity.html>

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