

US kids consuming fewer calories, report finds

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Experts credit healthier fare at schools, information campaigns for the turnaround.

(HealthDay)—Finally, some good news in the war on childhood obesity: Kids in the United States now consume fewer calories each day than they did 12 years ago, according to a new government report.

Even better, between 1999 and 2010, most boys and girls between 2 and 19 years old began getting more of their daily [calories](#) from muscle-building proteins and fewer from carbohydrates, which can easily spur weight gain when eaten to excess, the U.S. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) report found.

The findings, based on dietary data obtained from the National Health and [Nutrition Examination Survey](#), suggest a step in the right direction

for a nation where 17 percent of all children and adolescents are obese. Excess weight in childhood is linked to a host of health problems later in life, including heart disease and diabetes.

"This certainly reflects an improvement in food and drink-related decisions," said Rebecca Solomon, coordinator of [clinical nutrition](#) at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City.

"It would seem that education and public awareness about the importance of maintaining a healthy body weight may finally be getting to its intended audience," Solomon said. "Hopefully if we teach children the importance of appropriate [calorie intake](#) and nutrient balance, we will reverse the [obesity problem](#) over the next several decades."

When people eat more than they need to fuel their everyday activities, the body stores the extra calories as [fat cells](#) for use later. Over time, this can lead to weight gain and eventually obesity.

According to the new report, boys' daily [calorie consumption](#) on average fell from 2,258 calories in 1999-2000 to about 2,100 on average in 2009-2010. Girls' intake dropped from 1,831 calories to 1,755 during that time period.

The survey found some notable racial and ethnic differences in eating patterns, however.

For instance, the percentage of daily calories derived from protein—think of beans, nuts and meat—rose from 13.5 percent to 14.7 percent among boys and from 13.4 percent to 14.3 percent for girls during the 12-year period. However, protein consumption for black girls stayed around 13.5 percent.

Carbohydrate consumption—carbs are found in breads, potatoes and

pasta—decreased among boys, from 55 percent in the earlier time period to 54.3 percent in 2009-2010. For girls, carbohydrates dropped from 55.8 percent of their total calories eaten to 54.5 percent. These declines in carbohydrates were not seen among black girls and Mexican-American girls, however.

Experts hailed the findings and credited wide-ranging efforts from the White House to schools and altered decision-making by parents.

Sharon Zarabi, a nutritionist/fitness trainer at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City, believes that Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign may have increased awareness of the obesity epidemic and encouraged children to eat more nutritious foods and boost their activity.

"These results are surprisingly pleasing as I have been so conditioned to hearing only rising obesity rates," Zarabi noted.

"It's promising to see nutrition becoming a priority in schools starting with the banning of soda and sweetened beverages on campus," she added.

Zarabi said she believes the increased availability of low-fat milk, tofu, fruits and vegetables has encouraged children to make better choices at school and "hopefully at home."

Solomon also attributed the decrease in carbohydrate consumption to a better understanding of the empty calories in juice and soda. "It is possible kids are favoring water, seltzer or diet drinks as a response to the bad press about sugary beverages," she said. "In addition, high fructose corn syrup has been vilified over the past several years, and it's possible that parents and children are heeding the warning to reduce this type of sugar, among others."

However, Solomon expressed some concern that eating more protein is not necessarily a good thing. The availability of protein bars, soy snacks and Greek yogurt, which has nearly twice the protein, ounce for ounce, as typical yogurt, has likely increased protein intake, she said.

"We know that protein is essential for growth, but more is not necessarily better, as long as baseline protein needs are met," she added. However, "all food has calories, and it is possible to go too far and gain weight with an excess of any macronutrient—protein, fat and carb alike."

More information: The U.S. National Library of Medicine has more about [childhood obesity](#).

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