

# Childhood obesity rates drop slightly, CDC says (Update)

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Photo: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

U.S. government report finds good news in a critical fight.

(HealthDay)—There was a small but sure sign Tuesday that the fight against childhood obesity may yet be won: A new government report found that obesity rates among low-income preschoolers had declined slightly in at least 19 states.

After decades of increases, the report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that Florida, Georgia, Missouri, New Jersey, South Dakota, and the U.S. Virgin Islands saw at least a 1 percent decrease in their rate of obesity from 2008 through 2011. Rates in 20 states and Puerto Rico held steady, while rates increased slightly in three other states: Colorado, Pennsylvania and Tennessee.

"For the first time in a generation, we are seeing obesity go in the right direction in 2- to 4-year-olds, and we are seeing it happen across the

country," CDC director Dr. Tom Frieden said during a noon press conference.

"It's encouraging, but we have a lot further to go," he added. "We hope this is the start of a trend getting us back into balance."

Frieden credited the trend to such efforts as First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" program and better policies in the government's Women, Infants and Children's (WIC) program, as well as increases in breast-feeding, recognition that children need to be active and eating a more healthful diet by reducing things like juices and increasing consumption of whole fruits and vegetables, and also decreasing time in front of the TV or computer.

"Today's announcement reaffirms my belief that together, we are making a real difference in helping kids across the country get a healthier start to life," Michelle Obama said in a CDC news release.

She added, "We know how essential it is to set our youngest children on a path towards a lifetime of healthy eating and physical activity, and more than 10,000 child-care programs participating in the 'Let's Move! Child Care' initiative are doing vitally important work on this front. Yet, while this announcement reflects important progress, we also know that there is tremendous work still to be done to support healthy futures for all our children."

Earlier research found that about one in eight preschoolers is obese, Frieden said. In addition, children are "five times more likely to be overweight or obese as an adult if they are overweight or obese between the ages of 3 and 5 years," he noted.

For the report, which covered 40 states (but not Texas), the District of Columbia, the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, CDC researchers

looked at weight and height for nearly 12 million children aged 2 to 4 who took part in federally funded maternal and child nutrition programs.

"Obesity in kids has gotten worse over the past generation far faster than anyone could have anticipated," Frieden said. "This has happened when there has been no change in our genetics, so it's clearly a result of changes in the environment and it will be changed back by more changes in the environment."

Reversing the obesity epidemic begins with getting children to eat better and be more active, Frieden said.

To help reduce childhood obesity, the CDC recommends changes that:

- Make it easier for families to buy healthy, affordable foods and drinks.
- Provide safe, free drinking water in parks, recreation areas, child-care centers and schools.
- Help schools provide safe play areas by opening gyms, playgrounds and sports fields before and after school, and on weekends and during the summer.
- Help child-care providers adopt ways of improving nutrition and physical activity and limiting computer and television time.
- Create partnerships with civic leaders, child-care providers and others to make changes to promote healthful eating and active living.

Dr. James Marks, senior vice president and director of the Health Group at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, called the report particularly welcome news because it shows progress among populations that are at higher risk for obesity.

"These signs of progress tell a clear story: we can reverse the childhood

obesity epidemic. It isn't some kind of unstoppable force," said Marks. "Any community or state that makes healthy changes can achieve success. However, no single change is powerful enough by itself. It has taken a sustained, comprehensive approach in the places that have succeeded."

Dr. David Katz, director of the Yale University Prevention Research Center, said that "news about obesity has been far too grim for far too long."

"Over recent years, there has been, at last, some glimmers of hope, indications that rates of obesity are plateauing or even dipping slightly for some of the people, in some places," he said.

"But of course, there is that other half of the glass," Katz added.

"Obesity rates did not decline in the other 24 states in the analysis, despite widespread awareness of the problem and increasing efforts to address it. And we also know that rates of severe obesity continue to rise, suggesting that measures of our success may need to address not just how many are overweight, but how overweight are the many," he said.

**More information:** CDC report: [www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns](http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns)

For more information on childhood obesity, visit [the CDC](http://the CDC).

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