

New study to provide insights into young Europeans' health-related diet and lifestyle choices

September 5 2013



Credit: Vanessa Loring from Pexels

Why do some children live on a diet of fast food while others eat healthily? What causes a teenager to choose a hamburger over a salad?

Why do some choose to exercise whilst others do not? What are the health consequences of a poor diet, lack of physical activity and other risk factors? And is it possible to steer children and their families towards healthier lifestyle choices? Those questions and many more are investigated by far-reaching research into the dietary and lifestyle behaviour of young Europeans.

Around 22 million children in the European Union are considered overweight or obese, with the numbers growing by 400 000 every year. They face serious health and social risks, including cardiovascular disease, [type 2 diabetes](#), orthopaedic problems, underachievement in school and low self-esteem, and stand a 60 per cent chance of becoming overweight or [obese adults](#). Even many teenagers who are not overweight are also at risk of these disorders, because of unhealthy diets and low levels of physical activity.

In order to address these unhealthy [lifestyle choices](#) the underlying factors causing young Europeans to eat poorly and exercise less must be understood. That is the goal of a five-year study currently being conducted by a pan-European consortium of universities and research institutes in the EU-funded project I.Family ('Determinants of eating behaviour in European children, adolescents and their parents').

Building on the results of the IDEFICS project, which studied about 16 000 pre-teen children, the I.Family study invites these children plus their siblings and parents to participate in a follow-up. The follow-up is focusing on teenagers and in particular '[twins](#)' - 11- and 12-year-olds who are at a crucial stage in their development.

This cohort of children and their families are being studied in eight centres across Europe - Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain and Sweden - in an effort to unravel the interplay between complex lifestyle, behavioural and genetic factors and their impact on

dietary habits and health outcomes.

Through questionnaires, interviews on relationships and health, psychological tests and physical examinations, coupled with biological samples and measurements of physical activity, the researchers aim to compare children and their families who have developed or maintained a healthy diet and lifestyle with those whose diet and lifestyle has developed in an unfavourable direction.

Because the children being studied were already examined in the IDEFICS study, the researchers will be able to compile a profile over many years of the factors behind good or bad dietary choices.

They can determine, for example, if having two working parents leads to the consumption of more fast food, or whether concerns about safety on the streets in urban areas causes city-dwelling children to take less physical activity and live more sedentary lives.

By gathering information about children's current health, and drawing on the detailed information they already have about the subjects in their early years, the I.Family team will be able to investigate the pathways leading to different health outcomes such as obesity and metabolic disorders and their precursors in [children](#) as they grow up.

Among similar socio-economic groups with contrasting behaviours, the project plans to measure factors such as brain activation, the expression of genes related to food choice, the biological and genetic basis for taste thresholds, the role of sleep and sedentary time, physical activity and the impact of their surrounding environment.

Armed with this knowledge, the researchers then hope to be able to guide new approaches to promote healthy eating and [physical activity](#) behaviour to support policy development at the European, national and

local levels, enabling more families to make healthier choices.

The project is being managed by Professor Wolfgang Ahrens of the University of Bremen in Germany with funding of more than EUR 11.5 million, of which EUR 9 million came from the EU.

I.FAMILY involves a consortium of 17 partner institutions from 12 EU countries. The project ends in February 2017.

More information: I.FAMILY www.ifamilystudy.eu/

Provided by CORDIS

Citation: New study to provide insights into young Europeans' health-related diet and lifestyle choices (2013, September 5) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-09-insights-young-europeans-health-related-diet.html>

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