

Majority of very young children in California eat fast food at least once a week

November 26 2013, by Gwen Driscoll

(Medical Xpress)—A surprisingly large percentage of very young children in California, including 70 percent of Latino children, eat fast food regularly, according to a new policy brief by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.

The study found that 60 percent of all children between the ages of 2 and 5 had eaten fast food at least once in the previous week.

The majority of the state's [young children](#) also do not eat enough fruits and vegetables, with only 57 percent of parents reporting that their child ate at least five fruit and vegetable servings the previous day.

"A weekly happy meal is an unhappy solution, especially for toddlers," said Susan Holtby, the study's lead author and a senior researcher at the Public Health Institute. "Hard-working, busy parents need support to make healthy food selections for their kids."

The new study used data from several cycles of the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) to examine dietary behaviors of very young children, including their consumption of fast food, sugar-sweetened beverages, fruits and vegetables, and to gauge how much influence parents have over what their children eat.

The study's authors found that in both 2007 and 2009, about two-thirds of children between the ages of 2 and 5 ate at least one fast food meal during the previous week, and 29 percent ate two or more. About 10

percent of children in this age group ate three or more fast food meals the previous week.

Although this and previous studies by the center have noted a general decline in the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages among children in California, that positive trend is reversed when linked to fast food. Specifically, the study's authors found that children who ate two to three fast-food meals a week were much more likely to drink soda than those who ate less [fast food](#).

"Fast food combined with drinking soda at such a young age can set these kids up for obesity-related health problems," Holtby said.

Other key findings from the study:

Asian children eat the fewest fruits and vegetables

Defying the stereotype of the vegetable-rich Asian diet, Asian children were found to eat the fewest fruits and vegetables of any group—only 40 percent ate at least five servings of [fruits and vegetables](#) each day, compared with 56 percent of all the state's children.

Poverty and influence

Parents living in the poorest households—those below 100 percent of the federal poverty level—were less likely than parents in all other income groups to say they have "a lot" of influence over what their children eat.

Simple solutions

The authors noted that the data can help identify communities that may benefit from targeted messages about healthy eating and could help

promote programs and policies that support parents in offering healthier options to their very young children. For example, an educational campaign to encourage parents to swap fruit juice for actual fruit would go far in reducing unnecessary sugar and increasing fiber and other nutrients, the authors noted.

"Simple messages and programs can reinforce what every parent wants—the good [health](#) of their [children](#)," said Camille Maben, executive director of First 5 California, which funded the study. "This shows there is more work to be done to reach families with the critical education and support they need."

More information: Read the policy brief, "Majority of Young Children in California Eat Fast Food Regularly but Drink Less Soda." [healthpolicy.ucla.edu/publicat ... tail.aspx?PubID=1236](http://healthpolicy.ucla.edu/publicat...tail.aspx?PubID=1236)

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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