

Study identifies three risk factors most highly correlated with child obesity

January 14 2014

A University of Illinois study has identified the three most significant risk factors for child obesity among preschoolers: (1) inadequate sleep, (2) a parental BMI that classifies the mom or dad as overweight or obese, and (3) parental restriction of a child's eating in order to control his weight.

"We looked at 22 variables that had previously been identified as predictors of [child obesity](#), and the three that emerged as strong predictors did so even as we took into account the influence of the other 19. Their strong showing gives us confidence that these are the most important [risk factors](#) to address," said Brent McBride, a U of I professor of human development and director of the university's Child Development Laboratory.

"What's exciting here is that these risk factors are malleable and provide a road map for developing interventions that can lead to a possible reduction in children's weight status. We should focus on convincing parents to improve their own health status, to change the [food environment](#) of the home so that healthy foods are readily available and [unhealthy foods](#) are not, and to encourage an early bedtime," he added.

The researchers reached their conclusions after compiling the results from an extensive survey distributed to 329 parent-child dyads recruited from child-care programs in east-central Illinois as part of the U of I's STRONG (Synergistic Theory and Research on Obesity and Nutrition Group) Kids Program. The current research is based on the first wave of

data generated in this longitudinal study, taken when the children were two years old.

The survey yielded wide-ranging information on demographics, health histories of both child and parent, and pertinent feeding practices. Research assistants also did home visits with each participant, checking height and weight and taking further information about the parents' history. The data was then subjected to statistical analysis.

As a result of that analysis, McBride and U of I nutritional sciences graduate student Dipti A. Dev offer some recommendations for families.

Parents should recognize that their food preferences are being passed along to their children and that these tastes are established in the preschool years, Dev said.

"If you, as an adult, live in a food environment that allows you to maintain an elevated weight, remember that your child lives in that environment too. Similarly, if you are a sedentary adult, you may be passing on a preference for television watching and computer games instead of playing chasing games with your preschooler or playing in the park," she added.

Consider too that restricting your children's access to certain foods will only make them want those foods more, she said.

"If kids have never had a chance to eat potato chips regularly, they may overeat them when the food appears at a friend's picnic," McBride said.

Instead, work on changing the food environment in your home so that a wide variety of healthy choices such as fruits and vegetables are available while unhealthy options are not, he added.

"And remember that it takes a certain number of exposures to a food before a child will try it, let alone like it, so you have to offer it to them over and over and over again. And they have to see you eat it over and over," McBride noted.

Don't use food to comfort your children when they are hurt or disappointed, do allow your preschoolers to select their foods as bowls are passed at family-style meals (no pre-plating at the counter—it discourages self-regulation), and encourage all your children to be thoughtful about what they are eating, the researcher said.

More information: Risk factors for overweight/obesity in preschool children: An ecological approach was published in the October 2013 issue of *Childhood Obesity* (vol. 9, no. 6).

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Study identifies three risk factors most highly correlated with child obesity (2014, January 14) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-01-factors-highly-child-obesity.html>

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