

Fast food not the major cause of rising childhood obesity rates, study finds

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For several years, many have been quick to attribute rising fast-food consumption as the major factor causing rapid increases in childhood obesity. Now researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill report that fast-food consumption is simply a byproduct of a much bigger problem: poor all-day-long dietary habits that originate in children's homes.

The study, led by Barry Popkin, W.R. Kenan Jr. Distinguished Professor of nutrition at UNC's Gillings School of Global Public Health, found that [children's](#) consumption of [fast food](#) is only a small part of a much more pervasive dietary pattern that is fostered at an early age by children's parents and caregivers. The pattern includes few fruits and vegetables, relying instead on high amounts of [processed food](#) and sugar-sweetened beverages. These food choices also are reinforced in the meals students are offered at school.

"This is really what is driving children's obesity," said Popkin, whose work appears in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*. "Eating fast foods is just one behavior that results from those bad habits. Just because children who eat more fast food are the most likely to become obese does not prove that calories from fast foods bear the brunt of the blame."

The study looked at data acquired through the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey between 2007 and 2010. The researchers studied the dietary intake of 4,466 children between 2 and 18 years old

and whether they ate at fast-food establishments or elsewhere. The children were further categorized as being nonconsumers of fast food (50 percent of the children), low consumers (less than or equal to 30 percent of calories from fast foods; 40 percent of the children) or high consumers (more than 30 percent of calories from fast foods; 10 percent of the children). The researchers then determined which factors were most related to dietary adequacy and risk for obesity.

"The study presented strong evidence that the children's diet beyond fast- [food consumption](#) is more strongly linked to poor nutrition and obesity," said Jennifer Poti, doctoral candidate in UNC's Department of Nutrition and co-author of the study. "While reducing fast-food intake is important, the rest of a child's diet should not be overlooked."

Popkin said he is certainly no fan of fast-food consumption, but actually knowing where the problem originates is important if we are to invest in solutions that foster healthier habits, including reducing the consumption of sugary drinks and emphasizing more fresh vegetables and fruit.

"Children who rely on fast foods may tend to have parents who do not have the means, desire or time to purchase or prepare healthy foods at home," Popkin said. "This is really what is driving children's obesity and what needs to be addressed in any solution."

More information: [ajcn.nutrition.org/content/ear...
.113.071928.abstract](http://ajcn.nutrition.org/content/ear...113.071928.abstract)

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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