

Better eating habits, not bad economy, stabilized obesity rates

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All those people who've been telling us for years that we should eat more healthy foods and cut our calories – stop, take a moment, and celebrate.

It appears that we actually listened.

A new, extensive study from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Gillings School of Global Public Health says that it wasn't the Great Recession or any economic downturn that created a leveling of U.S. obesity rates (with some declines in certain subpopulations), as other scholars have suggested. Rather, the leveling and decline started well before that in good economic times and has continued. The reason is not economics as much as it is likely a result of more information and efforts aimed at producing healthier food choices and eating habits.

The study, titled "Turning point for US diets? Recessionary effects or behavioral shifts in foods purchased and consumed" was recently posted at the online site of [*The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*](#).

"We found U.S. consumers changed their eating and food purchasing habits significantly beginning in 2003, when the economy was robust, and continued these habits to the present," said Shu Wen Ng, assistant professor of nutrition at UNC's Gillings School of Global Public Health and the study's first author.

"These changes in food habits persist independent of economic conditions linked with the Great Recession or food prices," Ng said.

"The calorie consumption was declining at a rate of about 34 calories less per year among children aged 2-18 between 2003 and 2010 (vs. only 14 kcal/day among adults decline per year). The declines in food purchases after adjusting for all the economic changes was also at a rate of 34 kcal/capita per year among households with children between 2000 and 2011."

Ng adds that this dramatic turn in dietary behavior is more likely the outcome of sustained and persistent public health efforts aimed at raising awareness about the importance of healthy eating, providing better information about food choices, and discouraging unhealthy dietary choices.

The researchers used both nationally representative dietary intake data along with longitudinal data on daily food purchases from hundreds of thousands of Americans. The study samples included combined datasets from the NHANES study, which covered households comprising 13,422 children and 10,791 adults from 2003-2011; and the Nielsen Homescan Panel, which contains food purchase data from 57,298 households with children and 108,932 households without children.

The data show that calories declined more among children than adults and that the proportional decline in calories was greatest among calories from beverages.

Researchers then turned their analysis to examining how much of this decline was the result of the Great Recession and the year of large increases in [food prices](#) preceding the recession. If we looked only at the impact of the increases in unemployment related to the Great Recession, the study showed that each 1 percent increase in the unemployment rate in the area where respondents lived was associated with a 2-4 kcal/capita/day increase in calories purchased. This is small relative to the major declines that occurred over time.

"This analysis is significant as we found the largest declines were among households with children. However these declines did not occur uniformly. There were no significant declines in caloric intake observed among adolescents (12-18y), non-Hispanic black children and those whose parents did not complete high school," said Barry Popkin, Distinguished Professor of nutrition at UNC Gillings. "This suggests that certain subpopulations are still unable or unwilling to make these dietary changes."

While Popkin noted that the specific contributors for these changes in behavior are not quantifiable, he suggested that greater attention by the [public health](#) community and journalists to obesity overall, particularly to soft drinks and other high-calorie sugary beverages and the changes made by food companies or retailers may have produced significant rises in the awareness among consumers about the role of [food](#), particularly when it comes to caloric beverages in affecting obesity and health.

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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