

Study highlights long-term effects of childhood obesity on late-life health

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Childhood obesity rates have nearly tripled in the previous 30 years and researchers are asking the important question of how this epidemic will impact the future health of these obese children and public health in general. A University of Colorado Cancer Center article recently published in the journal *Gerontology* shows that even in cases in which obese children later lose weight, the health effects of childhood obesity may be long-lasting and profound.

"There were two things going on here. First, the earlier you are exposed to obesity, the earlier we may see the onset of complications including type II diabetes, [cardiovascular disease](#), metabolic syndrome and cancer. That makes sense: these complications don't happen overnight, and the earlier you start the ball rolling, the earlier and more likely you are to see early morbidity and mortality from them. But then it looks like independent of this increased-exposure effect, kids' maturing bodies may be especially vulnerable to the detrimental health effects of obesity. Early exposure can make you much more predisposed to complications than might exposure once the body is done maturing. It may be that childhood obesity changes the way the whole metabolism is working – and changes it during a critical developmental time frame," says Kristen Nadeau, MD, investigator at the CU Cancer Center, associate professor of Pediatric Endocrinology at the CU School of Medicine, and the paper's senior author.

Previous studies have shown the intuitive causal chain of childhood obesity leading to adult obesity, which in turn leads to complications, but

recent evidence shows that childhood obesity may also create these effects independent of [adult obesity](#). Childhood obesity may itself be enough to cause outcomes including [metabolic syndrome](#), cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and its associated cardiovascular, retinal and renal complications, nonalcoholic fatty liver disease, [obstructive sleep apnea](#), [polycystic ovarian syndrome](#), infertility, asthma, orthopedic complications, psychiatric disease, and increased rates of cancer, among others.

"However, our ability to make conclusions is complicated by a lack of data," Nadeau says. "Because the epidemic of childhood obesity is still relatively new, we simply don't have the longitudinal data to know how childhood obesity affects late-life health. The people who were children in, say, 1980 near the start of this rise in obesity rates are only reaching their 40s. Therefore one major message of our study is that we need increased funding aimed at tracking kids longitudinally so we are not just speculating about these long-term effects."

A second major finding, Nadeau points out, is that obesity is difficult to cure. "It doesn't just go away. It's hard to correct once it is established," she says. Thus as our understanding continues to point to dramatic detrimental effects of [childhood obesity](#), Nadeau and colleagues suggest that in addition to treatment for those already suffering from obesity, additional monies are needed for prevention.

"Early intervention to prevent the onset of obesity in childhood is essential because we can now see that the disease causes significant downstream problems and the expense of treating these consequences can be extreme," Nadeau says.

Provided by University of Colorado Denver

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