

Neighborhoods with healthy food options less likely to have overweight kids

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Children with a greater number of healthy food outlets near their homes had a reduced likelihood of being overweight or obese, finds an Australian study published in *American Journal of Health Promotion*.

Children who had access to at least one [healthy food](#) outlet within 800 meters (about half a mile) of their home had a 38 percent decreased risk of being overweight or obese compared to those who did not. Each additional outlet for healthy foods within that distance was associated with a 19 percent reduction in risk of being overweight or obese.

"Few previous studies have considered the likely reduction in risk of childhood overweight or obesity associated with proximity to healthy

[food outlets](#)," said lead author Laura Miller, Ph.D., an epidemiologist with the Public Health and Clinical Services Division for the state of Western Australia.

The findings are based on data collected from 1850 children ages 5 to 15 in the city of Perth in Western Australia and their neighborhood food outlets. The study controlled for age, physical activity, time spent sedentary, the number of take-out meals per week, and the socioeconomic status of the neighborhood. Food outlets in Western Australia must be registered with local government authorities and were geographically coded by location and types of food sold. In addition to familiar chains such as McDonalds, Chinese, Thai, and Indian take-out restaurants, fish-and-chips shops, burger joints, and pizzerias were all coded as fast food outlets. Supermarkets, fruit and vegetable shops, and butchers were coded as healthy food outlets.

"We chose our definition of 'fast food' based on previous studies which included both multinational and independent [fast food](#) outlets, and the assumption that people eating at these outlets have limited control over the ingredients and portion sizes provided," Miller explained. Supermarkets, general stores, fruit and vegetable stores, and butchers provide more healthy food options, and also allow for control over ingredients and portion size, she said.

"This study provides a sense of the associations between neighborhood food stores and restaurants relative to self-reported height and weight in Australian children," said Penny Gordon-Larsen, Ph.D., Professor of Nutrition at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a Fellow of The Obesity Society. "The work confirms findings from several studies in other locations, such as the U.S., Europe, and Canada, among other countries. It is important to note that the literature in this area is quite mixed, likely because of the complexity of the association between neighborhood food stores, diet, and body weight."

More information: Miller LJ, Joyce S, Carter S, Yun G: "Associations between childhood obesity and the availability of food outlets in the local environment: A retrospective cross-sectional study." *Am J Health Promotion*. 2014: Vol 28, No. 6, e137-e145.

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