

Importance of physical activity in preschoolers highlighted by researcher

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University of Otago research has revealed that young children who exhibit low levels of activity have significantly higher levels of body fat by the age of five. Credit: University of Otago

The journey to obesity can start as young as age one so increased physical activity should be established and encouraged early, University of Otago researchers say.

In a world first, Otago researchers tracked [physical activity](#) and sedentary behaviour in [children](#) aged one to five, and analysed how [activity](#) levels related to body composition at age five.

While three hours per day of light to vigorous activity is recommended, they found a large proportion of young children maintain a highly sedentary pattern.

The study, just published in the *International Journal of Obesity*, revealed children who exhibited low levels of activity had significantly higher excess body fat at age five, while those with consistently high levels of activity tended to have lower levels of excess body fat.

Lead author Dr. Kim Meredith-Jones, of the Dunedin School of Medicine, says more than 40 million children worldwide, under the age of five, are classified as overweight or obese.

However, little is known about preschoolers' physical activity patterns, or the impact they have on their health.

"The role that physical activity and sedentary behaviour plays in preventing or promoting excessive [weight](#) gain at this young age is of considerable interest.

"Considering many children who are overweight at a young age continue to remain overweight as they get older, early detection and intervention is important," she says.

Dr. Meredith-Jones says it is important to encourage and maintain physical activity because excess weight gain before age five may be maintained through adolescence and children who carry excess weight before age five are at greater risk of being an overweight adult.

Furthermore, the physical activity and sedentary behaviours established before age five may continue to disrupt energy balance into later childhood, resulting in further weight gains.

She believes environmental issues contributing to sedentary behaviour need to be addressed so healthy habits can be established early.

"These include access to outdoor play areas and resources in the community that encourage activity such as parks, playgrounds, and swimming pools.

"In terms of reducing [sedentary time](#), entertainment-based screen time needs to be reduced in favour of other developmentally appropriate activities, as well as encouraging a transition from sedentary behaviour to light [behaviour](#) such as standing rather than sitting," she says.

The researchers are now looking at investigating more patterns of physical and [sedentary activity](#) in this age group, including the proportion of kids who do and do not meet physical activity, sedentary and sleep guidelines across the five year period.

More information: Kim Meredith-Jones et al. Physical activity and inactivity trajectories associated with body composition in pre-schoolers, *International Journal of Obesity* (2018). [DOI: 10.1038/s41366-018-0058-5](#)

Provided by University of Otago

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