

Stress eating can start in early childhood, may lead to extra weight later

March 9 2018, by Laurel Thomas

The link between emotions and eating has been well established but new research from the University of Michigan shows that children as young as 4 who experience stress eat more in the absence of hunger, beginning a cycle that could possibly mean extra pounds down the road.

"We know from previous studies that people who have extremely adverse life experiences and [stress](#) in childhood have a tendency toward overweight and obesity. We know less about the pathway that might contribute to that," said Alison Miller, associate professor of [health](#) behavior and health education at the U-M School of Public Health.

"These are small increases over time in eating behaviors related to stress during the period of childhood ages 4 to 7 years. What's salient is that children who eat this way very early in childhood may be at higher risk of having these small changes lead to weight gain over time, increasing health risk."

In their study, Miller and colleagues found that greater stress exposure correlated to increases in eating in absence of hunger and in emotional overeating.

Unlike previous cross-sectional research, this study focused on behavior over time. The researchers followed 207 low-income children from 2009 to 2015, recorded stress exposures and observed their eating behaviors.

The researchers define early life stress as chaotic home environments,

and exposure to other negative life events, such as witnessing violence or trauma or experiencing material deprivation. Children in poverty are extremely vulnerable to violence exposure, food scarcity and worry over limited resources. These stresses can result in neurobiological, cognitive, social-emotional, behavioral and physical health effects.

"Kids who had higher levels of stress were observed to eat more in the absence of hunger and emotionally overeat more, as reported by their parents," Miller said. "Focusing on a pattern of eating as a stress coping mechanism in young [children](#) is important."

Miller said the public health response should be to screen for these risks at early life health appointments, address community issues like food scarcity, encourage physical activity, support parents so they can promote healthy habits, and work to improve stress regulation skills during childhood.

"One way to do this is by teaching coping and mindfulness (self-calming) skills to disrupt the link between stressful experiences and maladaptive health [behavior](#)," she said.

More information: Alison L. Miller et al. Early Childhood Stress and Child Age Predict Longitudinal Increases in Obesogenic Eating Among Low-Income Children, *Academic Pediatrics* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.acap.2018.01.007](#)

Provided by University of Michigan

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