

Mental health issues in Latinx middle schoolers may increase risk of sleep problems, obesity and unhealthy behaviors

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Latinx kids who experienced depression, anxiety or other mental health issues in middle school had a greater chance of developing sleep

problems, unhealthy weight gain and sedentary behavior in high school, according to a study out today.

The research, led by a team at the George Washington University, suggests that unhealthy behaviors linked to [mental health issues](#) may start early in life and trigger obesity, [high blood pressure](#), diabetes and other serious health problems.

"Our study suggests signs of depression or anxiety in Latinx kids can set up a cycle that leads to weight gain, an unhealthy diet, and inactivity by the high school years," Kathleen M. Roche, a professor of prevention and [community health](#) at the GW Milken Institute School of Public Health, said. "If such problems are not addressed early on they can set the stage for adult diseases like heart disease and stroke."

Latinx [high school students](#) are 50% more likely to be obese compared to white youth and are at much higher risk of developing diabetes, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. And researchers know that mental health issues can trigger many unhealthy behaviors such as overeating high-fat comfort food and a sedentary lifestyle.

Roche and her colleagues studied data from 547 Latinx middle school students in suburban Atlanta. The vast majority of students in the sample were U.S. citizens. The students were, on average, age 13 at the time of the first survey and 17 at the time of the most recent survey.

Researchers asked the students questions about their diet, sleep patterns and [physical activity](#). They also had youth report on their mental health symptoms such as depression and anxiety.

They found that even after adjusting for confounding factors, kids who had more depression, anxiety and other internalizing mental health

symptoms were more likely to be sedentary, to report more [sleep problems](#) and an unhealthy diet, and to be overweight or obese just four years later. These are all risk factors that can lead to cardiovascular disease in young adulthood.

The findings represent a sobering reminder that teens, even those in middle school, can suffer from mental health issues that continue into the high school years and may also set in motion health problems like obesity.

At the same time, the research also points to a solution: Roche says that prompt mental health treatment may help teens stop overeating and get involved in physical activities such as soccer or another sport.

"Just telling a kid to get out and move probably isn't going to motivate a teen who is sad or distressed," Roche said. "Depression and anxiety makes it much harder to get off the couch and move."

[Previous research conducted by Roche](#) in 2020 shows that when Latinx adolescents reported having a family member who was deported or detained under US immigration policy they had a high risk of reporting suicidal thoughts, early alcohol use and risky behavior.

In addition, [she and her colleagues](#) published research in 2022 showing that Latinx adolescents who took on more childcare responsibility during the COVID-19 pandemic reported significant increases in symptoms of depression and anxiety and experienced increased problem behavior such as conduct disorder and aggression.

This latest study adds to such findings by showing that mental health problems that surface during [middle school](#) may have enduring impacts on physical health well into the later [high school](#) years, Roche said.

The findings of such research indicate a critical need for increased health and social services that can help ease the mental distress faced by Latinx teens. Roche says parents, teachers and health professionals should be alert to symptoms of mental health problems and arrange for treatment that can keep teens stay active and healthy.

The study, "Mental Health During Early Adolescence and Later Cardiometabolic Risk: A Prospective Study of US Latinx Youth," was published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

More information: Kathleen M. Roche et al, Mental Health During Early Adolescence and Later Cardiometabolic Risk: A Prospective Study of US Latinx Youth, *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2023).

Provided by George Washington University

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