

New study shows linkage between teen girls' weight and sexual behavior

29 October 2009

A University of Pittsburgh study sheds new light on the relationship between race, body weight and sexual behavior among adolescent girls. The results suggest that a girl's ethnicity and her actual weight or perception of her weight may play a role in her participation in risky sexual behaviors. The study results are published in the November issue of *Pediatrics*, now available online.

The study, conducted by Aletha Akers, M.D., M.P.H., assistant professor of gynecology and reproductive sciences at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, and colleagues, further links girls at weight extremes with an increased risk for engaging in sexual risk-taking behaviors.

"This study will contribute to sexual health education prevention efforts, which can be tailored to address how cultural norms regarding body size may influence adolescent sexual decision making. Knowing how a girl perceives her weight may be just as important as knowing her actual weight," noted Dr. Akers.

Of the nearly 7,200 high school girls asked about their sexual activity and [risky sexual behavior](#) as part of the 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance survey, half reported ever having sex. Those girls who were both sexually active and overweight, or who thought they were overweight, were less likely to use condoms than normal-weight sexually active girls. Underweight girls also were less likely to use condoms.

The findings also suggested variability in the girls' sexual activity and sexual risk-taking behavior based on their ethnicity and actual or perceived weight.

- Caucasian girls who believed that they were underweight, whether accurate or not, were more likely to have had sex and to

have had four or more sexual partners. Overweight Caucasian girls were less likely to use condoms.

- Underweight African-American girls also were less likely to use condoms while overweight African-American girls reported four or more sexual partners.
- Latina girls of all weights were more likely to engage in a wide variety of sexual risk behaviors -- lack of condom or oral contraception use, sex before age 13, greater than four sexual partners and use of alcohol.

Source: University of Pittsburgh Schools of the Health Sciences ([news](#) : [web](#))

APA citation: New study shows linkage between teen girls' weight and sexual behavior (2009, October 29) retrieved 13 April 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-10-linkage-teen-girls-weight-sexual.html>

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