

One in ten kids have taste problems

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The prevalence of taste disorders in Australian children could be three times above the level defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a major public health crisis, new UNSW research has found.

In a study published in the journal *Acta Paediatrica*, researchers from the University of New South Wales (UNSW) found 10% of children aged between 8 and 12 could not correctly identify a taste as sweet, salty, bitter or sour. Aboriginal children fared even worse, with 12% of those tested showing problems.

“The World Health Organization defines a taste disorder prevalence of greater than 4% in a population as a massive public health problem, so there is an urgent need to confirm this result,” said study author, UNSW professor of neuropsychology David Laing.

“Given the increasing evidence of a relationship between taste loss and eating disorders, the incidence of taste loss found in this study suggests that the health of many of our children is at risk.”

Professor Laing said taste disorders have been shown to contribute to gross changes in eating behavior and could be one of the contributing factors to the rising epidemic of childhood obesity.

“Yet no population-wide study into the prevalence of taste loss has ever been undertaken in Australia. A wider investigation into the causes and the consequences of the inability to perceive the tastes of foods is urgently needed,” said Professor Laing, who’s based at UNSW’s School

of Women's and Children's Health.

In the study, researchers tested 432 children aged 8-12 years from six public schools in Dubbo in central western NSW. The cohort comprised 166 Aboriginal children and 266 non-Aboriginal children.

Taste disorders were found in 20 of the 166 Aboriginal students (12.0%) and 21 of the 266 non-Aboriginal children (7.9%).

Identifying 'sweet' was the most common problem, with almost two thirds (65.9%) of the 41 children with disorders unable to identify a sweet taste. However, many of the children had more than one taste disorder.

Professor Laing said impairment of taste can be caused by a variety of diseases and conditions including Bell's palsy, renal failure and diabetes, and by disorders of the oral cavity, salivary glands and middle ear infections.

The high rate of middle ear infections in Aboriginal children under the age of six could explain the high prevalence of taste disorders in this group, he said.

"Regardless of the causes, the incidence of taste disorders in both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children is high. And given the age of the children, it is likely that for many their taste loss is permanent," Professor Laing said.

"What effect taste loss is having on children's eating habits and their long-term health is unknown. Clearly there's a need for more investigations to look at the dietary behaviour of affected [children](#)."

Provided by University of New South Wales

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