

# Low childhood conscientiousness predicts adult obesity

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Hawaii school-children rated by their teachers in the 1960's as less conscientious had worse [global health](#) status as adults and had significantly greater obesity, [high cholesterol](#), and increased risk for cardiovascular disease. Childhood conscientiousness was significantly associated with decreased function of the cardiovascular and metabolic systems. This association was independent of the other Big Five personality childhood traits, adult conscientiousness, childhood socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and gender. This is the first study in which all the Big Five personality traits (extraversion, [agreeableness](#), conscientiousness, [emotional stability](#), and intellect/imagination) assessed in childhood have been used to predict objective health status assessed by multiple [biomarkers](#) over 40 years later in older adulthood.

Results from a longitudinal study show that children who exhibit lower conscientiousness (e.g., irresponsible, careless, not persevering) could experience worse overall health, including greater obesity, as adults. The Oregon Research Institute (ORI) study examines the relationship between childhood personality and adult health and shows a strong association between childhood conscientiousness (organized, dependable, self-disciplined) and health status in adulthood. ORI scientist Sarah Hampson, Ph.D., and colleagues at the Kaiser Permanente Center for Health, Hawaii report these findings in the August issue of *Health Psychology*. Hampson was recently the discussant for a panel on personality and health at the national American Psychological Association meeting in Honolulu, HI.

"These results are significant and unique because they show the far-reaching effects of childhood conscientiousness on adult health. Others have shown that more conscientiousness children live longer. Now we have shown that these conscientious children are also healthier at midlife" noted Dr. Hampson.

In the 1960's, over 2,000 children from entire classrooms in elementary schools on two Hawaiian Islands were comprehensively assessed on their personality characteristics. ORI researchers were funded in 1998 by the National Institute of Mental Health to locate and examine the health-related behaviors and mental and physical health status of these individuals. Almost 75% of those in the original group who could be located (mean age 51 years) have agreed to participate, and over 800 individuals completed a medical and psychological examination supported by subsequent grants from the National Institute on Aging.

The physical examinations took place at the Kaiser Permanente Center for Health Research, Hawaii in Honolulu and at medical clinics on the islands of Kauai, Hawaii, and Maui and included [biomarkers](#) of cardiovascular and metabolic systems such as height, weight, waist and hip circumference, blood pressure, cholesterol and fasting blood glucose.

"These findings suggest avenues for further research that may lead to interventions. People who are more conscientious tend to have better

health habits and less stress, which protects them from disease. Self-control is a key part of being conscientious, so our findings confirm the importance of teaching children self-control to enable them to grow up to be healthy adults," said Hampson.

**More information:** [www.ori.org/research/detail/pe...\\_a\\_longitudinal\\_study](http://www.ori.org/research/detail/pe..._a_longitudinal_study)

Provided by Oregon Research Institute

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