

Stress and obesity: Your family can make your fat

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Credit: Peter Häger/Public Domain

Adolescent obesity is a national public health concern and, unchecked, places young people on a trajectory for a variety of health issues as they grow older. A new study from the University of Houston Department of Health and Human Performance (HHP) and Texas Obesity Research Center (TORC) suggests there is a relationship between long-term exposure to three specific types of family stressors and children becoming obese by the time they turn 18 years old.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth, Assistant Professor Daphne Hernandez examined three family [stress](#) points → family disruption, [financial stress](#) and maternal poor health - and applied those to data of more than 4,700 adolescents born between 1975 and 1990.

"Experiencing family stress - specifically family disruption and financial stress - repeatedly throughout childhood was associated with overweight or [obesity](#) by the time adolescent girls turned 18," Hernandez said.

Interestingly, only one chronic family stress point -maternal poor health -was related to boys becoming overweight or obese by the time they turned 18.

"Overall, the findings suggest that female and male adolescents respond differently to stress. This study extends our knowledge of stress and obesity by focusing on the family environment over time. By knowing the types of stressors that influence female and male adolescent weight gain, we can tailor specific social services to be included in obesity prevention programs," she said.

Hernandez says the findings are important particularly to school-based obesity prevention programs that currently focus on dietary intake and physical activity, which she says yield only short-term benefits.

"These programs need to take a broader approach to combatting obesity by helping families experiencing these kinds of stressors find access to mental health programs, financial assistance or family counseling," she said. "Developing strategies to help with [family](#) stressors during childhood may help children maintain healthy weight into adulthood."

Her findings are published in the April issue of *Preventive Medicine*.

More information: *Preventive Medicine*: www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0091743515000158

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