

Experts provide insight on causes of child obesity, tactics to end it

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The Michael & Susan Dell Center for Healthy Living is a public-private partnership established to conduct research to better understand and influence behaviors and environmental conditions that affect healthy living, with a vision of "healthy children in a healthy world." Credit: The Michael & Susan Dell Center for Healthy Living at UTHealth School of Public Health

Encouraging more social interaction for children rather than just limiting TV time and enforcing strong nutritional policies in schools are two of the ways to decrease child obesity rates, according to researchers from the Michael & Susan Dell Center for Healthy Living at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston (UTHealth) School of Public Health Austin Regional Campus.

UTHealth [researchers](#) published eight new articles, including an introduction from the regional dean, as part of a special obesity issue of the *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*. The issue, titled "The Science of Childhood Obesity: An Individual to Societal Framework," provides insights into how to solve the child obesity epidemic and close the gap in the current understanding of its causes.

"Ongoing scientific updates of our understanding of the childhood obesity epidemic are important and urgent due to the rapid increase in the prevalence of obesity in both developed and developing countries during the last 30 to 40 years, despite countless initiatives to address [childhood obesity](#)," said Cheryl Perry, Ph.D., regional dean and Rockwell Distinguished Chair in Society and Health at UTHealth School of Public Health Austin Regional Campus.

According to national data, approximately 32 percent of children ages 6 to 19 are overweight or obese in the United States and these rates are even higher in Texas. The Michael & Susan Dell Center for Healthy Living is a public-private partnership that was developed between UTHealth School of Public Health and the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation to address child health issues through research, service and education.

Don't blame television for child obesity

Watching television has typically been viewed as one of the causes of obesity in children. However, according to UTHealth researchers, overweight or obese children may spend more time in front of the television because of social factors and friendship dynamics that lead them to spend less time with friends.

The authors of this paper examined data from the Child Development Supplement to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, which included information about the health, development and time use of 2,908 students ages 5 to 18. According to the study results, the more time children spent with friends, the more they engaged in physical activity, which in turn lowered rates of obesity.

"Efforts to reduce child obesity could benefit from careful attention to peer and friendship dynamics rather than simply focusing on time spent watching television," said Elizabeth A. Vandewater, Ph.D., lead author and associate professor in the Department of Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences at the School of Public Health.

Weak school nutrition policies might be counterproductive

Many states across the United States have banned the sale of soda in high schools and some schools have chosen to substitute soda with other sugar-sweetened beverages in vending machines.

Daniel Taber, Ph.D., and co-authors examined how these policies that regulate the sale of sodas in high schools affect alternate sugary drink consumption, such as tea, coffee, energy and sports drinks. The researchers drew their data from the National Youth Physical Activity and Nutrition Study, conducted in 2010 with 10,887 participants.

In schools and states that regulated both vending machines and soda

sales, there was no increase in alternate sugary drink consumption. However, states and schools that regulated either the sale of soda or the availability of vending machines, but not both, saw the highest increases in alternate sugary drinks consumption.

"Banning soda, but allowing sports drinks and coffee drinks in vending machines, just shifts sugary drink consumption from soda to the alternatives," said Taber, assistant professor in the Department of Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences at the School of Public Health.

Obesity has immediate consequences for school performance

Obese children are more likely to have school absences, school problems and lower [school](#) engagement than non-overweight children. This study provides evidence that obesity in children is associated with immediate poorer educational outcomes.

Lead author: Felicia R. Carey, Dell Health Scholar and doctoral graduate student at the School of Public Health

School poverty rates impact all students' odds of being obese

Students in economically disadvantaged schools were 1.7 to 2.4 times more likely to be obese, regardless of their individual family's income. The causes of child obesity extend beyond the home and schools are an important environmental influence, according to the study authors.

Lead author: Andrew E. Springer, Dr.P.H., M.P.H., assistant professor in the Department of Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences at the School of Public Health

The home food environment can overcome certain risk factors for child obesity

In this study, the home food environment, including mealtime structure and availability of healthy or unhealthy foods, was able to account for the differences in [children's](#) diet quality across socioeconomic and neighborhood factors. Making healthy foods more available, turning off the television during meals, and restricting unhealthy foods could lead to better diets and lower rates of child obesity among these at-risk populations.

Lead author: Nalini Ranjit, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Department of Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences at the School of Public Health

Focus groups are important for identifying needs in food deserts

The most important barriers influencing healthy food shopping behaviors are the prices of food, and lack of access and poor quality of the available healthy food. Conducting a needs-assessment in an area with inadequate access to healthy foods allows the community to offer potential solutions and provide direction for future planning. Solutions could include placing new supermarkets in these communities and developing farmers markets and community gardens.

Lead author: Alexandra Evans, Ph.D., associate professor in the Department of Health Promotion and Behavioral Sciences at the School of Public Health

Correcting for discrepancies in self-reported heights and weights across various demographics

This study examined the differences between the self-reported and actual heights and weights of 24,221 eighth- and 11th-grade students in Texas using the School Physical Activity and Nutrition (SPAN) study data. When surveyed, teenage boys tended to overestimate their height and teenage girls tended to underestimate their weight. The analyses and correctional equations provided in the article provide [child obesity](#) researchers with tools to improve the reliability of self-reported data.

Lead author: Adriana Perez, Ph.D., associate professor in the Department of Biostatistics at the School of Public Health.

More information: [sph.uth.edu/research/centers/d ... jbnpa-special-issue/](https://sph.uth.edu/research/centers/d...jbnpa-special-issue/)

Provided by University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston

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