

Overweight and Obesity Among African-American Youths

Leadership for Healthy Communities
Advancing Policies to Support Healthy Eating and Active Living

Fact Sheet | May 2010

While childhood obesity rates are considerably higher than they were a generation ago among the general population, children from certain racial and ethnic communities have been disproportionately affected. Sharply higher rates of overweight and obesity have occurred among African-American, Latino and American Indian and Alaska Native children and adolescents.¹

This fact sheet highlights the prevalence, consequences and causes of overweight and obesity among African-American youths. Additional fact sheets and resources on childhood obesity can be found at www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org.

Note: Leadership for Healthy Communities (LHC) generally uses the terms “Latino” and “American Indian and Alaska Native.” However, when citing research that uses terminology such as “Hispanic” or “Native American,” LHC defers to the authors’ terminology.



Facts At A Glance

- African-American adolescent girls are at greater risk of overweight and obesity than their white or Latino peers.
- African-American youths suffer a higher risk of developing chronic illnesses, including type 2 diabetes, hypertension and asthma, than their white peers.
- African-American adolescents are exposed to more food advertising on television than white adolescents.
- African-American communities have fewer supermarkets and recreational opportunities than white communities—limiting access to fresh fruits and vegetables and safe places for children to play.

Prevalence of Obesity Among African-American Youths

African-American youths suffer disproportionately from overweight and obesity.

- Currently, 35.9 percent of African-American children ages 2 to 19 are overweight or obese, compared with 31.7 percent of all children those ages.²
- Among young African-American children, 11.4 percent of those ages 2 to 5 already are obese.³
- Over two decades, the prevalence of obesity climbed from 10.5 percent to 18.1 percent among all adolescents ages 12 to 19. For African-American adolescents, the prevalence of obesity rose from 13.4 percent to 24.4 percent.^{4,5}
- The statistics are even more alarming for African-American adolescent girls ages 12 to 19. By 2007-08, 29.2 percent were obese—the highest prevalence of any age group by gender, race or ethnicity. By comparison, fewer than one in five Hispanic or white adolescent girls was obese.⁶

Consequences of Childhood Obesity

Overweight and obese children are more likely to suffer from serious, lifelong illnesses than their healthy-weight peers. The higher prevalence of overweight and obesity among African-American children places them at a higher risk of developing chronic diseases.

- Childhood obesity is associated with increased risk of asthma, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, sleep apnea and social stigmatization.⁷
- African-American children are more likely to develop diabetes than white children. Among children born in 2000, white boys have a 26.7 percent risk of being diagnosed with diabetes during their lifetimes, while African-American boys have a 40.2 percent lifetime risk. White girls born in 2000 have a 31.2 percent risk of being diagnosed with diabetes during their lifetimes, while African-American girls have a 49 percent lifetime risk.⁸

Causes and Determinants of Overweight and Obesity

A complex interplay of social, economic and environmental factors contributes to higher overweight and obesity rates among African-American children.

The Food Environment

African-American communities often lack access to affordable healthy foods.

- A study of more than 200 neighborhoods found four times as many supermarkets in predominantly white neighborhoods as in predominantly African-American neighborhoods. For both whites and African-Americans, the presence of at least one neighborhood supermarket is associated with an increase in fruit and vegetable consumption. African-Americans' fruit and vegetable consumption increased 32 percent on average for each additional supermarket in the community.^{9,10}
- Easy access to chain supermarkets is associated with lower obesity prevalence and adolescent body mass index (BMI), especially among African-Americans. Every additional chain supermarket per 10,000 people is associated with a .32 unit decrease

in BMI in African-American adolescents, compared with a .1 unit decrease in whites and a .09 unit decrease in Hispanics.¹¹

- African-American middle school students have less access to healthy food at school than their white peers. Only 46.5 percent of African-American eighth-graders have access to fruits and vegetables in school vending machines, student stores or snack bars compared with 62.7 percent of white eighth-graders.¹²

Media Influence

The presence and influence of media among African-American households pose a significant challenge to healthy eating and regular physical activity among children.

- African-American youths spend more time watching television compared with Hispanic or white youths. African-American children and adolescents watch an average of five hours and 54 minutes daily, while their Hispanic peers watch five hours and 21 minutes and their white peers watch three hours and 36 minutes.¹³
- Research shows that the number of hours spent watching television is positively associated with increased caloric intake, overweight and obesity. A study of sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders in the Boston area found that an extra hour of television is associated with the consumption of an additional 167 calories daily.^{14,15}

- African-American adolescents are exposed to more food advertising than white adolescents. A study found that African-Americans ages 12 to 17 viewed 14 percent more food product advertisements compared with white peers—a difference that would have been even greater if researchers had factored in the greater amount of time African-American adolescents spend watching television.¹⁶

The Built Environment

Environmental factors involving transportation, infrastructure and safety limit African-American children's options for physical activity.

- Residents of predominantly African-American neighborhoods have fewer opportunities for physical activity. These communities are significantly less likely to have parks, green spaces, pools or beaches.¹⁷
- African-American parents of youths ages 9 to 13 report more barriers to their children's physical activity than white parents. These barriers include transportation problems, concerns about neighborhood safety and the expense and availability of local opportunities. Of African-American parents, 30.6 percent cite a lack of opportunities as a barrier to physical activity, compared with only 13.4 percent of white parents.¹⁸

Summary

Because of the many barriers to healthy eating and active living, African-American children and adolescents are more likely to suffer from overweight and obesity than their white peers. Consequently, they are at a higher risk of developing serious, chronic illnesses. Comprehensive solutions, which include

increasing access to affordable healthy foods in communities and schools, limiting the marketing of unhealthy foods, addressing neighborhood safety and improving the built environment, are necessary to prevent childhood obesity and safeguard the health of African-American children.

Endnotes

1. Most data on the prevalence of childhood obesity among racial and ethnic populations are for African-Americans and Latinos.
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