

In the News

Study: Overweight infants tend to keep fat on

Kids may become obese by age 12

By Cheryl Clark
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

September 5, 2006

Parents and pediatricians have one less excuse to shrug off children's extra pounds as just baby fat that kids will eventually outgrow.

A new federal study led by a UCSD researcher tracked the growth of more than 1,000 children for a dozen years. It found that infants and children who are overweight at any point are more likely to remain overweight and even become obese by age 12.

"The general public believes that kids can grow out of any problems they are having with weight. But the point of our study is that they don't grow out of it, in all likelihood," said Dr. Philip Nader, a pediatrician at the University of California San Diego and principal author of the report, which is published today in the journal *Pediatrics*.

Nader characterized the results of his report as "sobering but not hopeless." He said the findings may spur parents to address the causes of obesity, such as spending too much time in front of the TV and computer, getting far too little exercise and eating way too much food high in sugar and fat.

Unlike previous research that documented the increase in overweight children by sampling various demographic populations, Nader's project enrolled infants shortly after they were born from hospitals in 10 cities nationwide. His study started in 1991.

Nader and his colleagues regularly weighed and measured the participants until they became adolescents, recording their weight and height at seven time points – 24 months, 36 months, 54 months and at ages 7, 9, 11 and 12.

Children overweight at least once during their measurements at 24, 36 and 54 months were five times more likely to be overweight at age 12 than those never categorized as overweight, the study concluded.

Children overweight twice during ages 7, 9 and 11 were 25 times more likely to be overweight at age 12. And school-age children overweight three times during the study were 374 times more likely to be overweight at age 12.

Conversely, no children in the study who weighed less than 50 percent of others in their age groups were overweight at age 12.

An upcoming report will analyze the children's weights at age 15.

Today's study defined "overweight" based on the body mass index, a formula based on gender, age, weight and height. "Overweight" was defined as having a body mass index greater than 84 percent but less than 95 percent of other children the same age. "Obese" was defined as having a body mass index greater than 94 percent of other children the same age.

The report may have underestimated the problem because a significant percentage of the children enrolled were from stable, middle-class families with two parents. Only 20 percent of the families were classified as low-income.

If the study had included more children from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds, who are generally thought to have higher rates for being overweight and obese, the statistics may have come out worse, said James Griffin of the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development, the federal agency in Bethesda, Md., that funded the study.

Griffin said he hoped the report would spur pediatricians to pay more attention to childhood weight.

"Sometimes doctors are not necessarily trained in nutrition and may be hesitant to work with the family, even if they know the child is overweight at such a young age," he said.

Dr. Stuart Cohen, a primary-care specialist at Rady Children's Hospital in San Diego, said pediatricians are getting tougher in their messages to overweight children's parents.

"Now we point to the consequences of being an obese child in terms of days missed from school from illness, loss of productivity and the social stigma a child endures from being overweight," he said. Added to that is the higher likelihood of diabetes, heart problems and many other diseases that are more common as the child becomes an adult.

"The overstuffed baby with chubby cheeks, which is the picture of the perfect baby from several generations ago, is no longer the gold standard for our children," Cohen said.

Based on his experiences and those of his colleagues, Cohen said he senses that parents may have concerns about their individual freedom and authority to choose what they and their children eat.

"But the same thing happened with cigarette smoking," he said. "Now, it's generally accepted in society that smoking is not a healthy lifestyle, and we are starting to look at obesity that way, too."

A 1999-2002 survey estimated that 16 percent of people in the United States ages 6 to 19 were overweight. The figure was 11 percent for a similar survey done from 1988 to 1994.

According to the Institute of Medicine, about 9 million children in the United States are considered obese.