

Childhood Obesity

The good news is that after years of explosive growth, levels of U.S. childhood obesity may be leveling off. The possible bad news is that the ongoing efforts by the nation's nutrition and health specialists may have had little to do with it.

The findings that obesity levels among teenagers have peaked is only preliminary, based on an initial study by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC study, led by Cynthia Ogden of the National Center for Health Statistics, monitored more than 8,000 children. Even so, experts such as Dr. Robert Keith, an Alabama Cooperative Extension System nutrition and health specialist and Auburn University professor of nutrition and food science, are heartened by the change.

"The positive thing is that all of the educational messages that we have been trying to drive home to parents and schoolchildren alike over the past 15 years are finally getting through and that at least some people are listening and following through with these changes. You have to believe that after all of these years of promoting these health messages to people at least some are hearing, becoming concerned about their children and making some lifestyle changes."

Still, Keith says that while some behavioral changes surely have occurred, the possible peak in childhood obesity may actually have nothing to do with lifestyle changes. Future studies even may prove that the peaking effect had little to do with educational outreach and everything to do with a combination of several environmental and human genetic factors.

In fact, Keith says it is possible two pervasive environmental factors—a chronic lack of exercise coupled with wide access to calories—have contributed to spiking obesity rates among children most genetically susceptible to these factors.

In effect, what is widely viewed as a peak is actually a genetic saturation point.

"It is possible that we've reached our saturation point in terms of the levels of physical inactivity and the amount of calories current available to us versus the number of children who are becoming obese," Keith says.

Simply put, he says, all of the people most susceptible to obesity based on current levels of physical activity and levels of available calories have become obese. And this theory, if it turns out to be true, presents a sobering reality to Keith and other health and nutrition specialists.

"The downside may be that we really haven't caused any significant lifestyle changes," he says. "It may be that few people have gotten the message and done anything — it's simply that we've reached this genetic saturation point."

For his part, Keith believes the nutrition message is getting through and that the apparent leveling off is due, at least in part, to ongoing efforts among nutrition and health professionals to warn Americans about the perils of obesity.

Despite this apparent leveling off, some 32 percent of U.S. children are overweight or obese—an astonishing change from just 20 years ago when only 10-12 percent of children were overweight or obese. "We've got a long way to go before we get back down to those levels, and I'm not really sure that we ever will get back down to those levels," Keith says.

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