Childhood obesity linked to stress

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Sunday May 17, 2009 (foodconsumer.org) -- High levels of stress in adolescents, especially those in low-income households, may be a direct contributor to childhood obesity, new research shows.

The Iowa State University study focused on low-income families in three cities: Boston, Chicago and San Antonio. Researchers looked at 1,011 adolescents, ages 10 to 15, and their mothers, and pinpointed four major stress factors that led to overweight and obesity.

“We found that an adolescent or youth who’s more stressed — caused by such things as having poor grades, mental health problems, more aggressive behavior, or doing more drugs and alcohol — is more likely to be overweight or obese,” said lead author Brenda Lohman, as quoted by Biomedicine.org. Lohman is an assistant professor of human development and family studies at the University.

According to the study’s abstract, the sample group included families with incomes below 200 percent of the poverty line. Researchers found that 47 percent of the teens in the sample were overweight or obese, but that number grew to 56.2 percent in kids who were dealing with four or more stress factors.

Entitled “Welfare, Children and Families: A Three-City Study,” researchers measured the height and weight of the teens to determine their body-mass index, or BMI.

The four factors used to determine the individual stressor index were:

* Academic problems
* Consumption of alcohol and drugs
* Acting out or aggressive behaviors
* Lack of future orientation

Researchers said it is possible that dealing with being overweight may also be causing some of the stress in the teens.

“It could possibly be that the obesity is leading to these stressors too,” said Lohman. “And so the work that we’re doing right now looks at which one of these is really coming first: the stressors or the obesity. We know that it is cyclical and that all of these factors just compound on each other.”

A mother’s stress, when compounded with low income levels and food insecurity in the household, contributes to a child’s chances of becoming overweight or obese, said the authors. In past studies, said Lohman, they found this association with only younger
children, not teens.

“But it may be that the adolescents are more cognitively aware of what’s going on in the household and they take on their mother’s stress as well,” said Lohman. “This may be exacerbated in houses where there’s not enough food.”

Lohman stressed that more holistic approaches to dealing with childhood obesity need to be taken. Healthcare professionals should focus on the health, well-being, nutrition and exercise of adolescents facing obesity problems.

“We really need to also look holistically at their life and work towards reducing stress and rates of food insecurity for those adolescents as well,” she said.

Congress is also urging action to stem the tide of the problem. In a House Healthy Families and Communities meeting held yesterday (May 14), lawmakers heard testimony from expert witnesses on childhood obesity, says an RTTNews release.

Rep. Michael Castle (R-DE) stressed that Congress needs to promote programs that address nutrition education and physical activity in schools. He said they should focus on “implementing programs with proven results in improving health outcomes, and targeting those children who are at the greatest risk.”

A bill to require nutrition standards for foods sold in school vending machines, introduced by Rep. Lynn Woolsey (D-CA) was also discussed.

The bill “will ensure that all foods sold in schools during the entire school day are based on current, scientific and sound nutrition standards,” said Woolsey.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation estimates that more than 23 million children and teenagers are overweight or obese, according to their website rwjf.com. Over the past three decades, obesity rates have soared among all age groups, they say, increasing more than four times among children ages 6 to 11.

The University of Iowa study was posted online by the Journal of Adolescent Health and will be published in the August issue. Besides Lohman, researchers included Drs. Susan Stewart, Craig Gundersen, Steven Garasky and Joey Eisenmann.

(By Sheilah Downey, and edited by Heather Kelley)