

One out of Three Latino Adolescents Overweight or At Risk

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The number of overweight adolescents has reached epidemic proportions—both nationwide and in California. More than one out of three Latino adolescents in California are overweight or at risk for overweight. Overweight adolescents are at increased risk for becoming obese adults and for developing chronic, serious and costly medical problems, such as diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers. The annual cost of obesity in California is more than \$6.4 billion.¹

Latino Adolescents Demonstrate Highest Prevalence of Overweight

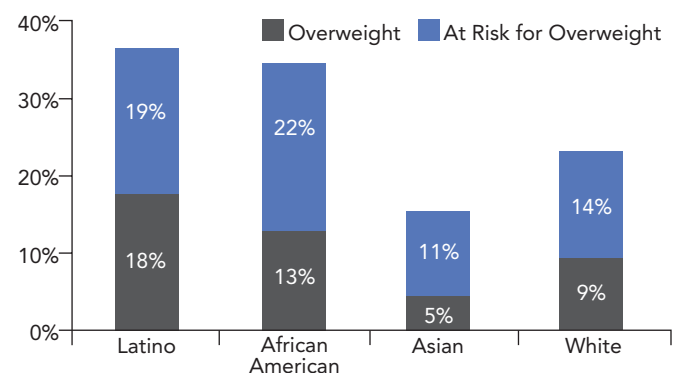
Among California adolescents, certain groups are more likely to be overweight or at risk for overweight. Latino adolescents were the most likely to be overweight and more likely to be at risk for overweight than Asian or white adolescents, leading to higher risks for overweight in adulthood (Exhibit 1).

Among Latino adolescents, the prevalence of overweight was twice as high in males as females (23% and 12% respectively; Exhibit 2). In addition, the prevalence of overweight among Latino adolescents who are U.S. born (20%) was nearly twice as high as among non U.S.-born Latino adolescents (11%). Other studies have shown that among U.S. immigrants, the number of years in this country is associated with an increase in overweight.²

Risk Factors for Overweight Among Latino Adolescents

Regular physical activity and a healthy diet are important to maintain healthy weight. An imbalance between these two factors contributes to overweight. Many Latino adolescents do not consume a healthy diet and do not get enough physical activity, which are behaviors that increase their risk for overweight and poor health.

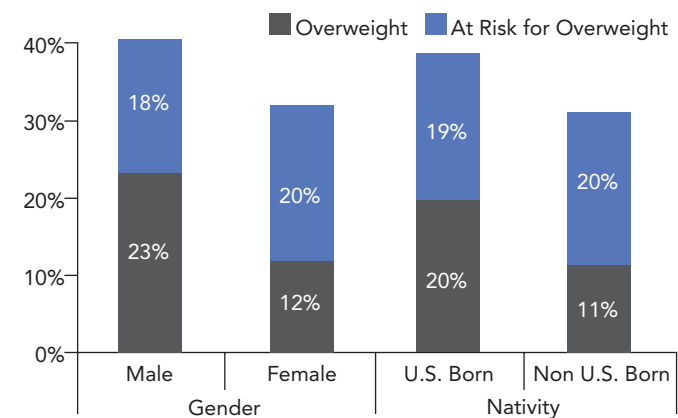
Exhibit 1: Prevalence of Overweight and At Risk for Overweight by Race/Ethnicity, Adolescents (Ages 12-17), California 2003



Note: Race/ethnicity is based on single race or the race/ethnicity with which the respondent most identifies. Body mass index (BMI) was calculated based on respondent reports of weight and height. A gender appropriate growth chart was used to compare reported BMI for age. Adolescents in the 85th-94th percentile are considered at risk for being overweight and adolescents in the 95th percentile and higher are considered overweight.

Source: 2003 California Health Interview Survey

Exhibit 2: Prevalence of Overweight and At Risk for Overweight by Gender and Nativity, Latino Adolescents (Ages 12-17), California 2003



Source: 2003 California Health Interview Survey

In California, three out of four Latino adolescents (76%) drank at least one soda every day, compared with just over half of white adolescents (57%). Sodas are one example of drinks popular among adolescents that are high in calories and low in nutritional value. Among Latino adolescents, 81% of males and 71% of females consumed at least one soda per day.

In addition, one in ten Latino adolescents (10%) reported engaging in no physical activity at all; with Latina girls (13%) being twice as likely to not participate in physical activity compared with Latino boys (6%).³ Of even greater concern is the disparity in the proportion of Latino adolescents (10%) who get no physical activity at all, which was more than twice that of white adolescents (4%).

Discussion

Overweight disproportionately affects Latino adolescents, and is a serious threat to the health and well-being of Latino communities—and consequently to California. Unhealthy eating and inactivity are behaviors that are influenced by conditions in the home, school, neighborhood and in the media. Latino adolescents are not alone in the obesity epidemic. Families, schools, communities, health professionals and policymakers throughout California need to become engaged in efforts to change the conditions that foster unhealthy eating and inactivity. Latino adolescents especially need to be involved as peer educators, thought leaders and advocates for practices, programs and policies that promote healthy eating and regular physical activity.

Policy solutions to the obesity epidemic must be considerate of the unique social, cultural and environmental circumstances that face Latinos. More research is needed to uncover the impact of immigration, social and environmental inequities, and cultural experiences on behaviors contributing to obesity; as well as to uncover the most effective means to prevent overweight among Latino youth. Policymakers should consider the following recommendations to reverse these alarming trends:

1) **Educate** and **require** schools to provide healthier food choices for children and adolescents; for example, replacing sugary snacks and sodas available in vending

machines with more nutritious snacks and healthier drinks.

2) **Ensure** that children are receiving physical education programs in all schools and after school programs.

3) **Encourage** the availability of affordable fresh fruits, vegetables and healthy food choices by locating grocery stores rather than liquor stores in all neighborhoods, and addressing the large presence of fast food restaurants in communities of color and low-income neighborhoods.

Author Information

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The Latino Coalition for a Healthy California (LCHC) is forming strategic alliances to address issues related to overweight and obesity, and suggests supportive sites such as The Strategic Alliance (www.eatbettermovemore.org) and the California Latino 5 a Day Campaign (www.dhs.ca.gov/ps/cdic/cpns/lat5aday/default.htm).

Data Source

Based on data from the 2003 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS 2003), this fact sheet examines overweight among Latino adolescents. CHIS 2003 provides the most recent information available on overweight among Californians. For more information on the California Health Interview Survey, please visit www.chis.ucla.edu.

Funders

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1 *The Economic Costs of Physical Inactivity, Obesity, and Overweight in California Adults*. California Department of Health Services, 2005.

2 Goel MS, McCarthy EP, Phillips RS, Wee CC. Obesity among U.S. immigrant subgroups by duration of residence. *JAMA*. 2004; 292: 2860-2867.

3 Engaging in "no physical activity" was defined as performing no vigorous activity (activity that made the respondent sweat or breathe hard) and no moderate activity (such as walking or bicycling) on any of the seven days prior to the survey.

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