

 By Alice Park Sunday, Feb. 07, 2010

To curb the childhood-obesity epidemic, health experts have long urged parents to make healthy changes to their family's lifestyle — such as eating nutritiously, reducing TV time, exercising and getting a good night's sleep.

Individually, these behaviors have been linked to a lower risk of obesity in kids, but researchers at Ohio State University were interested in learning whether their effect might be cumulative — that is, whether families who adopted not just one but two or more of these behaviors could reduce their children's risk of obesity even further.

Led by epidemiologist Sarah Anderson, researchers analyzed data on 8,550 4-year-olds in a national study and found that, indeed, children who practiced two healthy lifestyle behaviors were slimmer than those who adopted only one behavior, while youngsters who implemented three beneficial habits were the least likely to be overweight. "The more of these routines the children had, the lower was their risk of obesity," Anderson says. "If children had all three routines, their risk of obesity was 40% lower than children who had none of the routines."

The three behaviors Anderson studied were eating dinner regularly with the family, limiting the amount of time spent in front of the TV, and getting enough sleep. The children who were least likely to be obese ate dinner with their families six or seven times a week, slept for at least 10.5 hours each night and watched less than two hours of television per day.

The protective effect of these routines remained strong even after Anderson accounted for other factors that can contribute to childhood obesity, such as the mother's obesity and low family income. The findings suggest that adopting these routines can be a powerful way for families to encourage healthy weight in their children regardless of socioeconomic background, she says. (See the top 10 medical breakthroughs of 2009.)

In addition, says Dr. David Ludwig, director of the Optimal Weight for Life Program at Children's Hospital Boston, the routines are relatively easy for most families to adopt. "This is a beautifully simple study. It makes a very important point, and one that needs to be re-emphasized time and again. These are all behaviors that are within the reach of us all."

The data Anderson used came from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Birth Cohort, a government-sponsored study of a cross section of children born in the U.S. in 2005. The children were enrolled in the study at birth; their parents answered questions about the children's daily routines — including how much television they watched, when they went to bed each night and when they woke up each morning — at 9 months, 2 years and 4 years.

Anderson focused her attention on the 4-year-olds and found that families who had layered on the routines tended to have the slimmest kids. "We know that it's going to be more difficult for some families than for others to adopt these routines," she says. "But we can feel comfortable recommending them and encouraging parents to consider them, because not only do they offer protection against obesity, they are also likely to have other positive benefits in terms of children's social, emotional and cognitive development."

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Obesity experts stress that the key is to start somewhere, and these routines are as good a place as any. "We don't have to be running marathons every day," says Ludwig. "Even moderate improvements in these three key behaviors can translate into a marked effect on body weight." And when it comes to controlling weight, especially in youngsters, every pound counts.

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