

New factor in teen obesity: Parents

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There may be a reason teenagers eat more burgers and fries than fruits and vegetables: their parents.

In a new policy brief released today by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, researchers found that adolescents are more likely to eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables a day if their parents do. Contrarily, teens whose parents eat fast food or drink soda are more likely to do the same.

Every day, more than 2 million California adolescents (62 percent) drink soda and 1.4 million (43 percent) eat fast food, but only 38 percent eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables, according to the policy brief, "Teen Dietary Habits Related to Those of Parents."

The cause of the deficit of healthy foods in teen diets has been attributed in part to the high concentration of fast food restaurants in certain cities and neighborhoods and other environmental factors.

The new research is a reminder, however, that "good dietary habits start at home," according to center research scientist Susan H. Babey, a co-author of the policy brief. "If parents are eating poorly, chances are their kids are too."

Nearly one-third (30 percent) of California's teenagers are overweight or obese. Poor dietary habits, along with environmental and other factors, are strongly linked to obesity.

The policy brief, which was funded by a grant from the California Endowment, drew upon the responses of thousands of California teenagers queried by the center-administered California Health Interview Survey (CHIS), the nation's largest state health survey. Among the brief's findings:

- Teens whose parents drink soda every day are nearly 40 percent more likely to drink soda every day themselves than teens whose parents do not drink soda.
- Teens whose parents eat five servings of fruits and vegetables daily are 16 percent more likely to do the same than teens whose parents do not eat five servings a day.
- Nearly half of adolescents (48 percent) whose parents drink soda every day eat fast food at least once a day, while only 39 percent of teens whose parents do not drink soda eat fast food at least once daily.
- 45 percent of teens whose parents do not eat five servings of fruits and vegetables daily eat fast food at least once a day, while only 39 percent of teens whose parents eat five servings a day eat fast food at least once daily.

"The research shows us that one of the keys to solving the teen obesity crisis starts with parents, but we must also improve the abysmal food environments in many low-income communities," said Dr. Robert K. Ross, president and chief executive officer of the California Endowment. "While parents are the primary role models for their children and their behavior can positively — or negatively — influence their children's health, it is also essential that local officials representing low-income communities work to expand access to fruits, vegetables and other healthful foods."

Educating parents about unhealthy food choices, as well as how to plan and prepare healthier fare, would help in reducing teen obesity, according to the authors of the policy brief. They also recommend

employment policies that promote a better work-life balance. Given a more flexible schedule, more families might have time to prepare food at home and engage more often in family meals — an activity that has been linked to healthier lifestyles.

Healthy "food environments," such as supermarkets, farmers markets and other retail food outlets that offer fruits and vegetables instead of fast food, are also important in helping parents and teens practice healthy behaviors, the brief's authors said.

Source: University of California - Los Angeles

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