

# Cultural differences in children's fight against fat

June 12 2013

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(Medical Xpress)—NSW primary school children from Middle-Eastern and Asian backgrounds are significantly more overweight than children from English-speaking backgrounds and have lower levels of physical activity and cardiovascular fitness, University of Sydney research has shown.

The findings are published in the *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*.

Paper co-author, Dr Debra Hector from the University's School of Public Health, said the study was one of the first to look at both children's [ethnic background](#) and their [socioeconomic status](#) in combination.

"Our results indicate the need for [obesity prevention](#) initiatives to target children and their families from Middle-Eastern and Asian backgrounds who live in low socioeconomic areas," she said.

"They need to reach, and be culturally appropriate for, children who are most at risk."

The researchers analysed NSW population monitoring [survey data](#) for 4898 primary school children to examine if there were socioeconomic status (SES) differences within two of Australia's largest ethnic groups - Middle Eastern and Asian.

It also looked at whether there were differences between Middle Eastern, Asian and English-speaking children from low SES backgrounds.

"Almost one in two low SES boys from Asian (45 percent) and Middle-Eastern backgrounds (40 percent) were overweight or obese, compared with 25 percent of boys from English-speaking backgrounds," Dr Hector said.

"Similarly, [overweight and obesity](#) continues to be an issue among Middle-Eastern girls, irrespective of their SES background. These findings are of concern.

"Overall, the odds of being inactive, unfit and having a less [healthy diet](#) were significantly higher among children from Middle-Eastern and Asian backgrounds living in low SES areas."

Among low SES children there were clear differences in weight and weight-related behaviours according to cultural background. Compared with low SES boys from English-speaking backgrounds, low SES Middle-Eastern boys were twice as likely to be overweight/obese, six times as likely to be inactive and three times as likely to have low fitness.

In low SES Asian children, the prevalence of overweight/obesity was significantly higher among boys and lower among girls. Asian children were three times as likely to be inactive, and Asian boys six times as likely to be unfit, compared with their low SES English-speaking peers.

Some of the behaviours observed in the study, known for putting children at risk of developing lifelong poor eating habits and problems with weight, included not eating breakfast, drinking one or more cups of fruit juice daily, being rewarded with sweets for good behaviour and

eating energy dense, nutrient poor foods regularly.

"Other studies suggest that the acculturation of immigrant populations in Australia affects their obesity levels, with subsequent generations being at greater risk than the first generation," Dr Hector said.

"This research is a good foundation for developing culturally appropriate programs, including using qualitative research, to address lifestyle risks of children that are associated with a range of chronic diseases."

The researchers analysed data from the 2010 NSW Schools [Physical Activity](#) and Nutrition Survey. The prevalence of overweight/obesity was higher among children from Middle Eastern and Asian, compared with English-speaking background [children](#) (35.6 percent, 27.6 percent and 22.4 percent, respectively).

**More information:**

[onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jpc.12263/full](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jpc.12263/full)

Provided by University of Sydney

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