

Overweight children who eat vegetables are healthier, research finds

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Credit: CDC/Amanda Mills

Getting children who are overweight to regularly eat even just a helping or two of the right vegetables each day could improve their health in critical ways, a new study in the November edition of the *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* reports.

School cafeterias, families, policymakers and [health professionals](#) have been looking for ways to address a growing epidemic of childhood obesity, which is three times as prevalent now as it was a generation ago. The study's finding that even small amounts of green and orange vegetables can help the children who are most at risk—regardless of whether they lose weight—suggests selecting the right vegetables is a critical part of the puzzle.

The study found that making nutrient-rich vegetables (including leafy foods such as spinach or broccoli and orangish vegetables such as carrots) even a small part of a child's daily diet reduced bad fats in the body. It also improved insulin levels in a group of overweight Latino children monitored by a research team from the Keck School of Medicine at the University of Southern California and from The University of

Texas at Austin.

Children who regularly consumed one or two fist-size servings of these nonstarchy vegetables reduced their risk for liver problems, Type 2 diabetes and other complications of obesity. Although the children, who ranged in age from 8 to 18, continued to eat fewer nutritious vegetables than what's recommended by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the improvements to their [health](#) were significant.

"For a lot of at-risk children, intake of vegetables is really low," said Jaimie Davis, an assistant professor in the Department of Nutritional Sciences at UT Austin and one of the authors of the study, which notes that fewer than 6 percent of children eat the USDA-recommended multiple servings of nutrient-rich vegetables most days.

"We found, though, even eating less than a full serving of these vegetables can really have a pronounced effect on [children's](#) health. One large leafy green salad as a regular part of lunch is enough to make a difference."

Researchers looked at the effects of nutrient-rich vegetables in the diets of 175 overweight or obese Latino youths in Los Angeles. They found differences of a quarter cup per day in consumption of nutritious vegetables could be linked to improvements in metabolic health, including lower [insulin levels](#) and fewer "bad fats" in the body: visceral fat that lingers around internal organs and liver fat. Some types of body fats are more dangerous because they can lead to serious health complications, and they send the wrong signals to the brain about when and how much to eat.

Authors of the study emphasized that the type of vegetable matters, and that starchier vegetables such as corn and potatoes did not bring the positive effects of leafy greens and orange [vegetables](#).

More information: "Vegetable Consumption Is Linked to Decreased Visceral and Liver Fat and Improved Insulin Resistance in Overweight Latino Youth," Lauren T. Cook, Gillian A. O'Reilly, Michael I. Goran, Marc J. Weigensberg, Donna Spruijt-Metz, Jaimie N. Davis. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, Volume 114, Issue 11, Pages 1776–1783, November 2014. DOI: [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2014.01.017](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2014.01.017)

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