

Living near fast food outlets linked to weight gain in primary school children

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Credit: UWE Bristol

Children with greater access to fast food outlets are more likely to gain weight compared to those living further away, new research suggests.

Academics from the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol) tracked the [weight](#) of more than 1,500 primary school children in South Gloucestershire between reception year (aged 4-5) and Year 6 (aged 10-11).

The study found children living closer to fast [food outlets](#) were more likely to gain a significant amount of weight between the first and last year of school.

Lead researcher Matthew Pearce, a former UWE Bristol public [health](#) student now working for the NHS, believes the findings raise important questions about the role of the local [food environment](#) and its influence on the diet of young children.

He said: "We know from national data that the number of children classified as obese doubles between the first and last year of primary school. Understanding the reasons for this is important to protect the future health of children.

"Obesity is driven by many complex factors. Our

study adds to existing evidence that the neighbourhood environment plays an important role in the development of obesity."

Previous research has found that adults and children who live near fast food outlets are more likely to be overweight or obese but the UWE Bristol study is the first to show an association between accessibility to fast food outlets and weight gain over time.

Mr Pearce has called for more to be done to help people lead healthier lives.

He said: "While ultimately it is down to individuals on how they choose to live, it is widely accepted that we live in environments that make managing our weight increasingly difficult. We therefore need national and local policy makers to take decisions that support more favourable conditions that enable people to eat healthier and become more physically active."

The study found a higher density of fast [food outlets](#) within poorer neighbourhoods, highlighting the challenges in analysing the impact of the environment on people's health.

UWE Bristol public health lecturer Dr Issy Bray, who worked on the study with Mr Pearce and fellow UWE Bristol academic Michael Horswell, said: "While our study tried to control for other factors that might influence a child's weight, at this stage we can only say there is a relationship. It may be the association is due to other aspects of these neighbourhoods, such as cycling and walking infrastructure. Further research should be undertaken to understand how [children](#) and their families interact with the neighbourhood and environment."

The study has been published in the *Journal of Public Health*.

More information: Matthew Pearce et al. Weight gain in mid-childhood and its relationship with the fast food environment, *Journal of Public Health* (2017). DOI: [10.1093/pubmed/fox108](https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fox108)

Provided by University of the West of England

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