

Health habits are established early in life

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The foundation of good health is laid early in life. Two studies show that dietary habits and body size in Norwegian children remain stable for the first seven years of life.

Body size and diet largely remain stable for Norwegian children in the first seven years of life. This is the conclusion of two studies that have examined the significance of stability in dietary habits, and stability in body size in the childhood years.

Heredity and environment

"Genes can have a considerable influence on the development of overweight and obesity in childhood, but the impact of the environment surrounding children is also of major importance," reports Anne Lene Kristiansen, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Oslo's Department of Nutrition.

"Several systematic reviews have shown that overweight in parents is a key risk factor for overweight in the child. We also found this in our analyses. Overweight in the mother in particular is highly significant."

The results show that from the perspective of public health it is vital to promote a healthy diet at an early stage. This applies especially to the children of parents with a high body mass index.

Stable dietary habits in childhood years

Statistics derived from responses given in questionnaires answered by 9,025 mothers give a clear picture: there are few changes in the diet of Norwegian children during the first seven years of life.

Mona Bjelland is one of few researchers who have studied the stability of [dietary habits](#) in small children. She is also a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Oslo's Department of Nutrition.

"The children who eat little [fruit](#) and vegetables from as early as 18 months onwards also eat little fruit and vegetables at the age of seven.

We observe a similar pattern when it comes to soft drinks and sugary fruit squash. The children who drink most at the 18-month stage are also those who drink most at the age of seven," says Bjelland.

The results are clearly linked to [social differences](#). For example, the children of mothers with lower education eat fruit and vegetables more seldom and drink soft drinks and sugary fruit squash more often compared with the children of mothers with higher education.

"Nevertheless it is gratifying that the intake of [soft drinks](#) and sugary fruit squash appears to be low in childhood years," states Bjelland.

The greatest challenge regarding Norwegian children is to increase the children's consumption of fruit and vegetables.

It is not only the diet that remains stable for the first seven years of life. Anne Lene Kristiansen has examined stability in children's body size at birth and then at one, three and seven years of age respectively, and has concluded that this also remains stable.

The study presents Norwegian data on stability in children's [body size](#) for the first time. It also makes a significant contribution to research by including data from the time of birth, which we have had no satisfactory knowledge of previously.

"The findings are important because they confirm that Norwegian conditions are comparable to international conditions," Kristiansen maintains.

The results are also significant in the context of Bjelland's findings.

"We know that a diet with little fruit and vegetables combined with a daily intake of sugary drinks over time can increase the risk of

developing overweight and obesity," says Bjelland.

"Therefore preventive and health-promoting interventions are vital."

Diet in kindergarten

The two researchers are currently working together on a project that in their view may help to solve some of the main challenges presented by the diet of small children.

"Kindergartens have a great potential to become an important arena for promoting a [healthy diet](#) in small children so that healthy eating habits are established at an early stage," says Kristiansen.

"The kindergarten can also help to even out the social differences we see in the [diet](#) of small children today, since the large majority of children under school age attend a kindergarten," Bjelland adds.

The study is called BRA—med grønnsaker (GREAT—with vegetables) and was carried out between 2015 and 2017 among kindergarten children in the county of Vestfold. The goal is to identify effective, evidence-based interventions that will increase the consumption of vegetables among [children](#). These interventions will be accessible nationally to all counties, municipalities and kindergartens at the end of the study.

The two studies are based on data from the [Norwegian Mother and Child Cohort Study](#) at the Norwegian Institute for Public Health.

Provided by University of Oslo

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