

Report: Nearly one in seven adolescents has obesity

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Roughly 15.5% of adolescents have obesity, a condition that may be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and also could put children at increased risk of severe illness from the virus.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation released a new report, “[State of Childhood Obesity: Prioritizing Children’s Health During the Pandemic](#),” on Wednesday with state and national obesity statistics for children ages 10-17 years and recommendations for helping children access healthy food.

“Childhood obesity remains an epidemic in this country,” Jamie Bussel, senior program officer at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, said in a news release. “The COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing economic recession have worsened many of the broader factors we know contribute to obesity, including poverty and health disparities. We must confront these current crises in ways that also support long-term health and equity for all children and families in the United States.”

Obesity is defined as body mass index at or above the 95th percentile for age and sex and has long been linked to increased risk of type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also has deemed it a [possible risk factor for severe illness from COVID-19](#).

Data from the 2018-’19 National Survey of Children’ Health show the obesity rates were highest among Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander children (40%), followed by American Indian/Alaska Native (29%), Black (23%), Hispanic (21%), multiple race (15%), White (12%) and Asian (6%) children. The obesity rates in low-income families were more than double the rates for adolescents in high-income families.

“We’ve seen these disparities for decades when it comes to childhood obesity rates,” Bussel said. “This year, we’ve also seen people of color and people with low incomes hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic. In both cases these outcomes reflect decades of disinvestment in specific communities and specific groups of people, often driven by the systemic racism and discrimination that are still so prevalent in our society.”

The highest adolescent obesity rate was in Kentucky (24%) and the lowest was in Utah (10%). Kentucky, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee and Arkansas all had obesity rates that are statistically significantly higher than the national rates.

During the pandemic, school closings have meant many children cannot access free, healthy meals and parental job losses make it more difficult to afford healthy food, according to the report. The foundation makes numerous recommendations to help improve access both during the pandemic and for the long term. It recommends increasing and expanding benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), ensuring access to free school meals even when schools are holding classes virtually and raising the nutrition standards for these meals.

“SNAP, WIC, and school meals all have proven benefits for children and families,” Bussel said. “Given the unprecedented circumstances families are facing, we must make sure that they reach everyone who is eligible. Doing so will help make sure children and families can stay healthy during this pandemic, and likely reduce the risk for obesity in the long term.”

The group also calls for ensuring safe access to parks, opportunities for physical activity and for the national dietary guidelines to encourage a reduction in sugar consumption.

Resources

- [AAP clinical report "The Role of the Pediatrician in Primary Prevention of Obesity"](#)
- [AAP Institute for Healthy Childhood Weight](#)
- [Bright Futures health initiative](#)
- [Change Talk: Childhood Obesity initiative](#)
- [Information from HealthyChildren.org on obesity](#)

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