

Overweight and Obesity Among African American Youths

Leadership for Healthy Communities
Advancing Policies to Support Healthy Eating and Active Living

Fact Sheet | May 2014

While childhood obesity rates among all demographic groups are considerably higher than they were a generation ago, children from certain racial and ethnic communities have been disproportionately affected. Sharply higher rates of overweight and obesity have occurred over the last few decades among African American, Latino, and American Indian children and adolescents.¹ Today, the newest data indicate that, while leveling off in some sectors of the American populace, obesity rates among these ethnic groups remain significantly high.

This fact sheet is based on the most current research highlighting the prevalence, consequences, and determinants of overweight and obesity among African American youths. Additional fact sheets and resources on childhood obesity are available at www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org.



Facts At A Glance

- African American children and adolescents are more likely to be overweight and obese than their White peers.
- African American youths are at higher risk of developing diabetes than their White peers.
- Food advertising continues to target African American youths more aggressively than White youths.
- African American communities have fewer chain supermarkets and safe places to play than White communities—limiting access to fresh fruits and vegetables and opportunities for physical activity.

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Prevalence of Overweight and Obesity Among African American Youths

African American youths suffer disproportionately from overweight and obesity.

- Currently, 35.2 percent of non-Hispanic Black youths ages 2 to 19 are overweight or obese, compared with 31.8 percent of all children and adolescents.²
- The prevalence of overweight and obese non-Hispanic Black youths ages 2 to 19 decreased 3.9 percentage points from 39.1 percent to 35.2 percent between 2009-10 and 2011-12.^{3,4}
- Differences exist in overweight and obesity prevalence rates for non-Hispanic Black girls and boys. For ages 6 to 11, non-Hispanic Black boys have a higher obesity and overweight prevalence rate than non-Hispanic Black girls (39.3 percent vs. 36.9 percent). But among adolescents, girls have a higher prevalence rate with 42.5 percent of non-Hispanic Black girls ages 12 to 19 being obese or overweight compared with 37.3 percent of boys.⁵
- Obesity prevalence – defined as being in the 95th percentile or higher for BMI – for non-Hispanic Black youths aged 2 to 19 decreased from 24.3 percent in 2009-10 to 20.2 percent in 2011-12. The current obesity rate among non-Hispanic Black youths is still higher than the national average of 16.9 percent.^{6,7}

Consequences of Childhood Obesity

Overweight and obese children are more likely to suffer from serious, lifelong illnesses than their healthy-weight peers. The higher prevalence of overweight and obesity among African American children places them at a greater risk of developing chronic diseases.

- Childhood obesity is associated with an increased risk of type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and other cardiovascular disease risk factors, asthma, sleep apnea, and social discrimination.⁸
- Non-Hispanic Black children are more likely to develop diabetes than non-Hispanic White children. Among children born in 2000, White boys have a 26.7 percent risk of being diagnosed with diabetes during their lifetimes, while Black boys have a 40.2 percent lifetime risk. White girls born in 2000 have a 31.2 percent risk of being diagnosed with diabetes during their lifetimes, while Black girls have a 49 percent lifetime risk.⁹
- Among 18-year-olds, non-Hispanic Blacks carrying excess weight have a higher lifetime risk for diabetes than non-Hispanic Whites with similar body mass indexes (BMIs). The average Black 18-year-old female with a BMI equal to or greater than 30 but less than 35 has a 60.1 percent lifetime risk of developing diabetes, while a similar White female has a 48.8 percent lifetime risk.¹⁰

Determinants of Overweight and Obesity

A complex interplay of social, economic, and environmental factors contributes to higher overweight and obesity rates among African American children.

The Food Environment

African American communities often lack access to affordable healthy foods.

- Easy access to chain supermarkets is associated with lower obesity prevalence and adolescent BMI, especially among African Americans. Every additional chain supermarket per 10,000 people is associated with a 0.32 unit decrease in BMI in African American adolescents, compared with a 0.10 unit decrease in Whites, and a 0.09 unit decrease in Hispanics.¹¹ Zip codes with predominately African American residents have 52 percent as many chain supermarkets as zip codes with predominantly White residents.¹²
- In predominantly Black urban neighborhoods, fast-food restaurants make up a larger percentage of the total number of restaurants than in predominantly White neighborhoods.¹³

Media Influence

The influence of unhealthy food and beverage marketing on African American households poses a significant challenge to healthy eating.

- African American youths see about 50 percent more fast-food advertisements than their White peers. This exposure to fast-food ads might contribute to African American youths ordering more fast-food than White youths.^{14,15}
- In 2007, African American youths ages 12 to 17 saw an average of 19.7 food advertisements per day compared with 12.7 advertisements for White youths.¹⁶

- Exposure to food advertisements per day among African American youths ages 12 to 17 increased by 5.2 percent between 2003 and 2007. The increase in exposure to fast-food advertisements is even higher at almost 30 percent.¹⁷

The Built Environment

Environmental factors involving transportation, infrastructure, and safety limit African American children's options for physical activity.

- Access to parks and recreational facilities is critical for health. For non-Hispanic Black children with access to recreational parks and facilities, the prevalence of obesity and overweight was less than half that of their peers without access.¹⁸
- Parents of non-Hispanic Black youths aged 9 to 13 years perceive more barriers to their children's physical activity than the parents of non-Hispanic White youths. In one study, 30.6 percent of parents of Black youths cite a lack of opportunity in the neighborhood, compared with 13.4 percent of parents of White youths. Similarly, 32.6 percent of parents of Black youths cited transportation problems, compared with only 18.9 percent of parents of White youths.¹⁹
- Black children are more likely to live in unsafe neighborhoods than White children. Twenty-six percent of Black parents reported their neighborhoods were unsafe compared with eight percent of White parents.²⁰

Summary

Because of the many barriers to healthy eating and active living, African American children and adolescents are more likely to suffer from overweight and obesity than their White peers. Consequently, they are at a higher risk of developing serious, chronic illnesses. Comprehensive solutions, which include increasing

access to affordable healthy foods in communities and schools, limiting the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages, addressing neighborhood safety, and improving the built environment, are necessary to prevent childhood obesity and safeguard the health of African American children and adolescents.

Endnotes

- 1 Most data on the prevalence of childhood obesity among racial and ethnic populations are for African Americans and Latinos.
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