

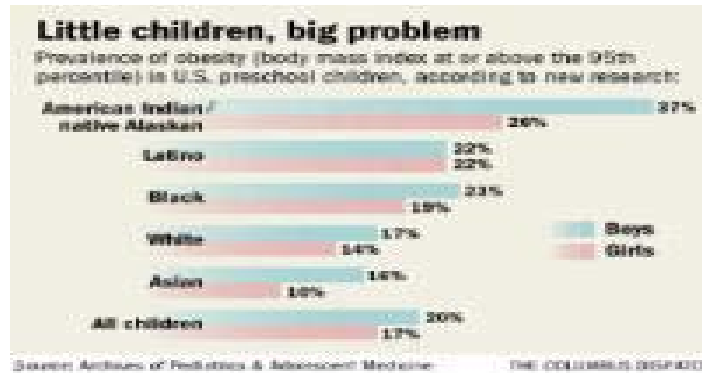
Obesity affecting younger children

Study: 1 in 5 preschoolers obese; worse for minorities

Tuesday, April 7, 2009 3:20 AM

By [Misti Crane](#)

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH



[click here to enlarge graphic](#)

Destany Franclemont eats more Cheerios and fewer French fries, frozen yogurt instead of ice cream, and no longer goes to bed with a bottle of whole milk.

Meanwhile, the TV is getting less attention from the 4-year-old Pataskala girl as fun physical activities have become a priority in her home. Like so many other children, Destany has had weight problems since she was a toddler.

Her mother, Michelle Wakefield, is working with nutrition and fitness experts in hopes of helping her daughter before excess weight leads to diabetes and heart trouble.

Almost 1 in 5 preschoolers is obese, and the numbers are even worse for minority groups, according to the largest analysis of obesity among 4-year-olds based on race and ethnicity.

[Story continues below](#)

The study, published in this week's *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, found that 18 percent of 4-year-olds are obese.

Researchers, including lead author Sarah Anderson, an assistant professor of epidemiology at Ohio State University's College of Public Health, looked at the body-mass indexes of 8,550 U.S. children.

American Indian/native Alaskan children fared the worst, with 31 percent considered obese based on national childhood growth charts. Asians fared best, with a 13 percent prevalence of obesity. Ranked in between were Latinos, blacks and whites.

Overall, boys were more likely to have weight problems than girls.

"It's incredibly sad, but not surprising," said Dr. Robert Murray, director of Nationwide Children's Hospital's Center for Healthy Weight and Nutrition.

It's crucial to get the message to parents and doctors that earlier intervention is ideal to sidestep serious health repercussions, he said.

"This youngest age group, 2 to 5, is one of the fastest-rising groups of obese kids in the world," he said. "We're seeing the metabolic effects of excess weight at very, very young ages."

The disparities found in the new study mirror those seen in older children and in adults.

There is no clear answer as to why a black or Latino child is more likely to be overweight than a white child, Anderson said. Socioeconomic differences alone don't offer an explanation, according to the research.

Anderson encouraged parents of all races and ethnicities to talk to their pediatricians about weight concerns early.

"Doctors themselves may not want to bring it up."

Wakefield said her entire family is benefiting from nutrition and fitness information they are getting from Children's experts.

Destany, who is biracial, has lowered her body-mass index from 34 to 32 in two years; that means she remains in an at-risk group but is making progress.

The Ohio Department of Health, which issued an obesity plan last week, is working to reach more parents of children such as Destany, and to send messages that playtime is essential to good health, said Nan Migliozzi, acting director of the Office of Healthy Ohio.

Obstacles to overcoming childhood obesity include everything from dangerous neighborhoods to the absence of grocery stores in some neighborhoods, she said.

mcrane@dispatch.com