

LONDON (Reuters) –

Children who are overweight or obese by the age of 11 are likely to carry their excess weight into adulthood and to suffer from related health problems, researchers said on Friday. A study by scientists at University College London who tracked nearly 6,000 children in Britain over five years showed about a quarter had a weight problem when they entered secondary school.

"Children who joined the study at age 11 and were already plump did not slim down at all over the five years of follow-up," said team head Professor Jane Wardle. The research, published online by the British Medical Journal, suggests that by the age of 11 a tendency to be overweight or obese is already set.

"It looked like **obesity at 11 is already persistent obesity**, so these things are being set earlier than we had previously thought," she told Reuters. Although the findings related to British children, Wardle said there is no reason to suspect that the same phenomenon would not be seen in other countries. "I think of it as being part of the whole obesity epidemic. What is happening is that persistent obesity is starting earlier and earlier," she added.

Health experts expect child obesity rates to soar in most parts of the world by the end of the decade. In Europe the number could reach 26 million, according to the International Obesity TaskForce (IOTF). Overweight children face an increased risk of type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, raised cholesterol levels and cancer as they grow older. Wardle and her team said **29 percent of girls** were overweight or obese, which was more than in boys. It rose to **38 percent among black girls** but fell to **20 percent for Asian females**. There was little difference in weight in boys of different ethnic origins but **31 percent of students from a deprived socio-economic background had a weight problem**, according to the research. Wardle said the gender and ethnic association with excess weight was significant and requires further research.

Changes in diet, less exercise and too much time spent in front of television and computer screens have been blamed for the obesity rise. North America, Europe and parts of the Western Pacific have the highest prevalence of overweight children.

Wardle said the findings of the study, which was funded by the charity Cancer Research UK, highlight the need for early intervention to prevent childhood and adult obesity. "I think society as a whole needs to take childhood obesity much more seriously," she added.

Development of adiposity in adolescence: five year longitudinal study of an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse sample of young people in Britain

Jane Wardle, *professor of clinical psychology*,¹ Naomi Henning Brodersen, *research fellow*,¹ Tim J Cole, *professor of medical statistics*,² Martin J Jarvis, *emeritus professor of health psychology*,¹ and David R Boniface, *statistician*¹

¹ Cancer Research UK Health Behaviour Unit, Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, University College London, London WC1E 6BT

² Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, Institute of Child Health, London WC1N 1EH

Correspondence to: J Wardle j.wardle@ucl.ac.uk

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Objective To examine the developmental trajectory of obesity in adolescence in relation to sex, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Design Five year longitudinal cohort study of a socioeconomically and ethnically diverse sample of school students aged 11-12 years at baseline.

Setting 36 London schools recruited to the study in 1999 by a stratified random sampling procedure.

Participants 5863 students participated in one or more years.

Main outcome measures Weight, height, and waist circumference measured annually by trained researchers; overweight and obesity defined according to International Obesity Task Force criteria; adiposity and central adiposity indexed by body mass index (BMI) and waist standard deviation scores relative to 1990 British reference values.

Results In school year 7 (age 11-12), the prevalence of overweight and obesity combined was almost 25%, with higher rates in girls (29%) and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (31%) and the highest rates in black girls (38%). Prevalence of obesity increased over the five years of the study at the expense of overweight, but no reduction occurred in the proportion of students with BMIs in the healthy range. Waist circumferences were high compared with 1990 norms at age 11 (by 0.79 SD in boys and by 1.15 SD in girls) and increased further over time. Both BMI and waist circumference tracked strongly over the five years.

Conclusions Prevalence of overweight and obesity was high in London school students, with significant socioeconomic and ethnic inequalities. Little evidence was found of new cases of overweight or obesity emerging over adolescence, but few obese or overweight adolescents reduced to a healthy weight. The results indicate that persistent obesity is established before age 11 and highlight the need to target efforts to prevent obesity in the early years.