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Children growing less active, study finds

UCSD research gauges youths' exercise habits

By Cheryl Clark
STAFF WRITER

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The time that children spend biking, running or doing other exercise drops sharply between ages 9 and 15, putting them in danger of becoming obese and developing chronic health problems, according to a major national study led by UCSD.

The report appears in today's edition of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Researchers measured physical activity by attaching small devices called accelerometers to the waistbands of about 1,000 children in 10 cities. The purpose was to accurately measure the youngsters' exercise levels, rather than rely on estimates from them or their parents.



SEAN M. HAFEEY / Union-Tribune
Eliza Hull stayed active by taking a summer swim program at the La Mesa Community Center yesterday.

The youngsters were tracked from 2000 to 2006 for at least one week at ages 9, 11, 12 and 15.

The federal government funded the study, which is described as one of the largest and most comprehensive on the topic.

Children should engage in moderate to vigorous physical activity for at least an hour each day, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and many health experts recommend.

At age 9, children in the study spent an average of about three hours doing such exercise. Less than one-third of them met that benchmark at age 15.

The decline is likely worse because researchers had programmed the accelerometers to record even regular walking as moderate exercise.

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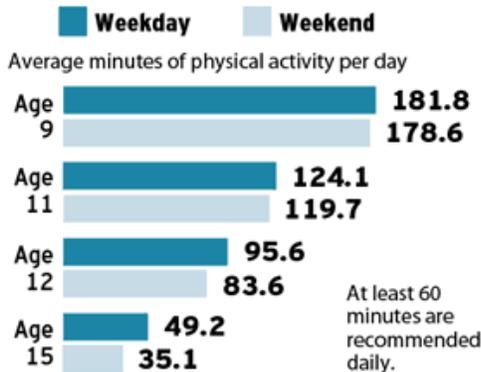
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DAILY PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Children become more sedentary as they grow older, according to a study led by the University of California San Diego. The lack of exercise was greatest during the weekend.



SOURCES: Dr. Phil Nader; Journal of the American Medical Association

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The study builds on many reports highlighting poor childhood diets, rising numbers of overweight and obese children and the growing trend of schools cutting physical education classes, lead author Dr. Philip Nader said.

“I wonder what will it take for (policymakers) to wake up and notice this is a problem?” said Nader, a professor of pediatrics at the University of California San Diego. “There is a need for program and policy action as early as possible.”

As a child in San Francisco, Nader added, “I would get on my bike and ride all day. . . . You could explore things and sometimes have social activity with friends and learn self-reliance, how to get around. These are things that kids are missing today, and it could mean trouble for their health in years to come.”

One striking finding is that while levels of physical activity consistently declined from ages 9 to 15, they fell most rapidly between 12 and 15.

At age 12, 83 percent of the children met or surpassed the hour-per-day exercise threshold during weekdays and about 62 percent did so during weekends. At 15, those percentages dropped to nearly 31 percent on weekdays and almost 17 percent on weekends.

Nader said the big decrease between ages 12 and 15 might be linked to children's transition to middle school and puberty, a time commonly marked by changes in everything from friends to the distance between home and school.

For example, he said, “It's possible that middle schools are farther away, and one has to be driven rather than walk or bike.” An important discovery is that levels of physical activity declined more on the weekend than during weekdays. It suggests that school activities may encourage some exercise, while children may spend additional time on the couch or in front of the computer during weekends, Nader said.

“If we just took walks with our family after dinner, or went to a park,” children would not only get more exercise but also be able to spend more time with their families, he said.

Alarming trend

- Over the past 20 years, the prevalence of overweight children and adolescents has nearly tripled.
- In San Diego County, nearly one-third of children in the fifth through ninth grades is overweight, similar to the national rate.
- Compared with children of healthy weights, overweight youngsters are more likely to have low self-esteem and depression. They also face a greater risk of developing diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure and some forms of cancer.

SOURCES: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; California Department of Education

Nader worked with colleagues at the University of Arkansas, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and RTI International.

While the report does not focus on obesity, Nader said it's well established that low levels of physical activity heighten a child's risk of becoming overweight or obese. In time, excess weight can lead to heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and other health problems.

“While there have been many gains in life expectancy for today's adults, there are concerns that because of inactivity and obesity, children may have a shorter life expectancy,” Nader said.

His report comes a few weeks after a large pediatricians' group recommended that some children as young as age 8 be regularly screened for cholesterol and take drugs to lower cholesterol levels if they're too high.

The UCSD study is significant, said Dr. Robert Ross, head of the California Endowment. His nonprofit has given grants to programs designed to create communities that are safe and conducive to walking and bicycling.

“It's easy to lecture a kid or a parent that a child needs 45 to 60 minutes of exercise every day. But that kid's environment has to be supportive of that strategy, and right now, our environments just are not,” Ross said.

He said society must try harder to find remedies, such as encouraging software makers to build more games that stimulate exercise.

In San Diego County, the Childhood Obesity Initiative is helping to launch projects intended to make it easy for children to be physically active outdoors, said Cheryl Moder, director of the initiative.

The campaign brings together county administrators, educators and health officials. It has received \$165,000 from the California Endowment, \$50,000 from the First Five Commission and \$50,000 from San Diego County to coordinate programs that promote exercise and healthy eating.

For example, a project in La Mesa includes a grant to build a quarter-mile pathway linking a school with a residential neighborhood.

The initiative supports a program in which physicians write prescriptions for exercise to children at risk of becoming obese. Those prescriptions can be used to obtain discounts or free admission to designated recreation centers.

Another effort is under way to persuade school districts in the county to use physical education time for physical activity, rather than for driver's education or such. Walking clubs are being formed at many schools, Moder said.

“Most kids don't get daily P.E.,” she said.

Reversing the patterns of inactivity and consumption of unhealthy foods might seem insurmountable, Moder said, “but fighting this is just like any major public health change. When we were kids, there were no seat belts, our parents smoked cigarettes – and look at how our culture has since changed.”

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