

After-school exercise and nutrition programs can help reduce childhood obesity

June 18 2013, by Amy Albin

(Medical Xpress)—Research has shown that children from low-income neighborhoods are at higher risk of being obese and overweight than children from affluent neighborhoods; in fact, one-third of low-income children enter kindergarten either overweight or obese.

In an effort to address this issue, UCLA researchers implemented and evaluated the effectiveness of a pilot after-school health-promotion program that focused on increasing students' opportunities for [physical activity](#) and healthy snacks—and boosting their knowledge about physical activity and nutrition—at four low-income, diverse [elementary schools](#) in Los Angeles County (four additional school sites were used as comparisons). The study involved students in grades 3 through 5.

After-school staff members were trained by UCLA researchers to implement the evidence-based, sequential nutrition and physical activity curriculum. Data were collected by researchers on students' nutrition and physical activity knowledge and behavior, and their height and weight measurements, at the beginning and end of the academic year.

Results showed that the proportion of children who were obese or overweight in the [intervention group](#) decreased by 3.1 percent by the end of the school year, compared with a 2.0 percent reduction among children in the comparison group. The study found mixed results regarding diet and physical activity knowledge and behavior.

The authors conclude that enhancing after-school physical activity

opportunities through evidence-based programs can potentially benefit low-income children who are overweight or obese.

Findings from this study indicate that after-school programs have the potential to provide opportunities for enhanced physical activity and the development of [healthy habits](#) in [children](#) from socioeconomically disadvantaged families who may have limited access to [nutritious foods](#) and environments conducive to physical activity outside of school.

In addition, as approximately 60 percent of the students in the study were Asian-American, the study helps address the dearth of published research on childhood obesity among Asian-Americans. This is an important public health concern, given that Asian-Americans are the fastest growing racial group in the U.S., and the literature suggests that current definitions of obesity underestimate the disease risk among this subgroup, the study authors said.

The article, "Improving [Overweight](#) Among At-Risk Minority Youth: Results of a Pilot Intervention in After-School Programs," is published in a supplement to the current edition of the *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*.

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