

Childhood obesity, malnutrition connected to mom's perception of child's weight

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A new study from the University of Houston Department of Health and Human Performance finds a child's risk for obesity or malnutrition may be tied to the mother's misperception of her child's weight status. A key to understanding this phenomenon may lie in how she regards her own weight status. Researchers say the situation shows that healthcare providers need to broaden their health care screenings.

The study, titled "Low-Income Immigrant Hispanic Mothers' Concerns and Perceptions of Their Young Child's Weight," examined survey responses from 70 low-income immigrant Hispanic mothers. Assistant professor Daphne Hernandez notes that many mothers accurately estimated their children's [weight](#), but more than 54 percent of mothers with an overweight or obese child perceived him or her as having a healthy weight.

"It is difficult to decrease the childhood obesity prevalence rates if parents are not able to accurately detect that their children are overweight or obese," Hernandez said. "They may perceive that their child will not have weight problems in the future once he grows taller or becomes older, but the situation clearly requires an intervention that explains and promotes a healthy lifestyle."

The study also found that mothers who perceived their child to be in fair or poor [health](#) were more likely to underestimate their weight. "In these cases, mothers seem to link 'health' with 'weight.' They may believe that more weight is needed to help improve the child's health," she said. "The mentality that a 'chubby baby is a healthy baby' may still be preferred. So the way mothers perceive their children's health appears to be closely tied to their [weight status](#)."

One critical factor is the level of concern that mothers have regarding their own weight. In the study, mothers who were concerned about becoming overweight also were more concerned

that their child would become overweight in the future.

Hernandez says public health nurses, especially those who are bilingual, can develop brief health screenings that focus on a mother's concerns about her weight and that of her child. These brief interventions can be part of a well-child doctor visit.

"For instance, nurses can engage in a conversation with mothers about the importance of eating fruits and vegetables on a limited budget, reducing sugary drinks and snacks that are high in sugar or salt," she said. "They also can educate on the importance of getting enough sleep and increasing physical activity, even where there is not a lot of space indoors or out."

She adds these interventions also can serve as an assessment of the [mothers'](#) parenting practices around health and knowledge of how these behaviors affect their children's weight.

"Health care practitioners can assist by explaining how a [child's](#) weight and height are used to calculate a [body mass index](#)," she said. "They also can discuss the health problems that go along with being overweight or obese, like type 2 diabetes or hypertension."

Hernandez's research focuses on the complex factors that may lead to obesity, such as poverty, stress, family structure and social support. The study was published in the journal *Public Health Nursing*.

Provided by University of Houston

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