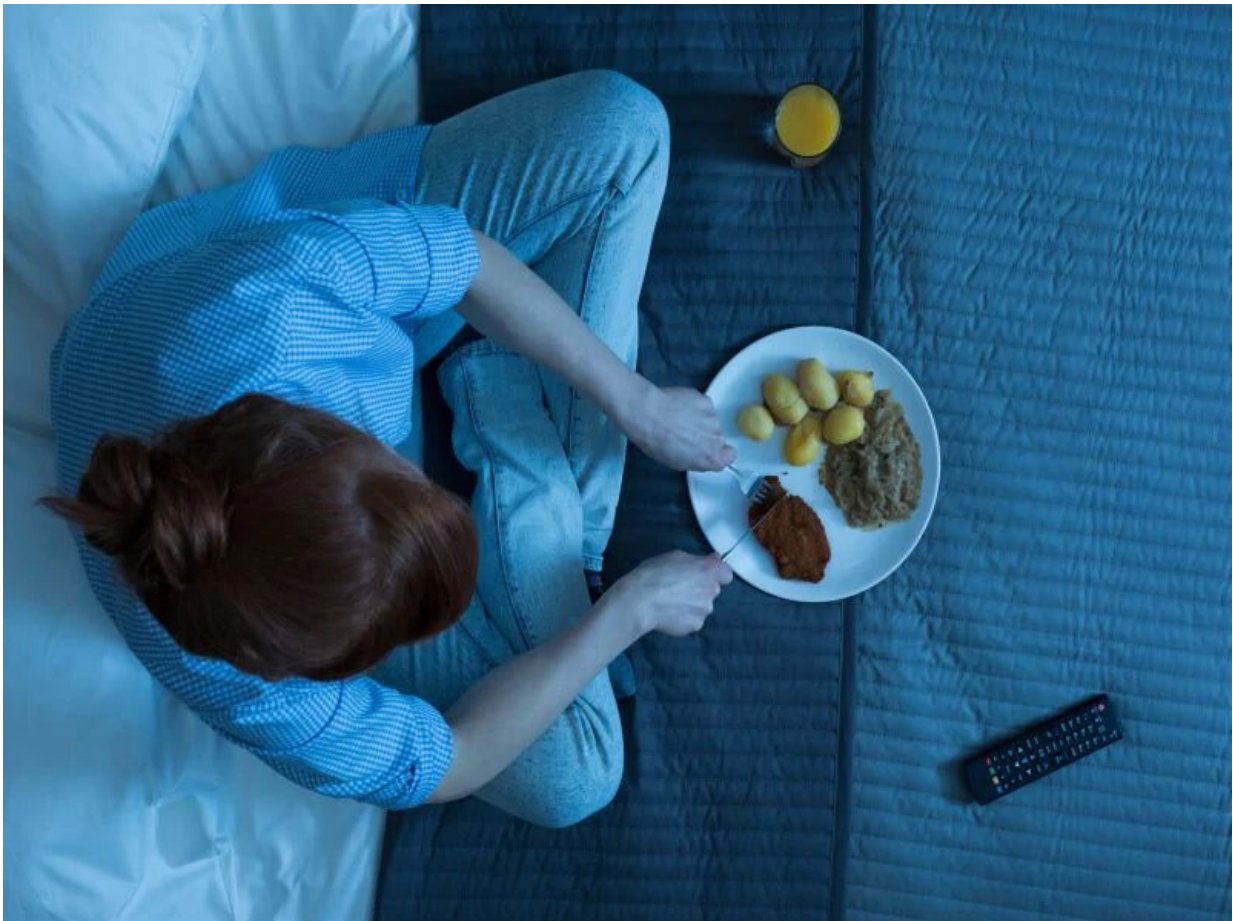


Lockdowns can widen kids' waistlines—here's how to curb that

October 27 2020, by Dennis Thompson, Healthday Reporter



(HealthDay)—Stuck at home, bored. Fiddling with their phone or

playing video games. Munching on snack foods to while away the time.

School-age children gaining excess pounds could be one lasting health problem caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, with pediatricians and public health experts warning about a potentially dramatic increase in [childhood obesity](#).

"I think it is possible, and potentially even likely, that we may see childhood obesity rise following stay-at-home orders, virtual school and increases in home-schooling," said Michelle Cardel, associate director of the Center for Integrative Cardiovascular and Metabolic Diseases at the University of Florida College of Medicine. "Children are trading in their structured [time](#) at school for [screen time](#) and 24/7 access to their kitchen."

Nearly 1 in 5 U.S. children was considered obese back in 2016, the last time the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention assessed childhood obesity.

There was good news in that CDC study, however—it appeared that the prevalence of childhood obesity had plateaued, thanks to a number of public health measures aimed at preventing [weight gain](#) in kids, said Dr. Amy Lee, a weight control expert.

"They are now predicting that because of COVID and everything that's happening, there may be an undoing of that plateau," Lee said. "We may see this heading the wrong direction."

It makes sense that kids kept home during lockdowns would be vulnerable to weight gain, Cardel said.

"The data is pretty clear that when kids are home for the summer, for example, we do see increases in weight during that time due to the

unstructured nature of their lives during the summer," Cardel said.

Kids at home don't tend to specific periods for play and physical activity, a set time for a healthy school-provided lunch, and little to no opportunity for snacking, Cardel and Lee said.

Some [early studies](#) have indicated that kids might indeed be gaining weight as a result of the pandemic.

For example, kids in lockdown tended to eat an additional meal per day, sleep an extra half hour, spend more time on screen devices, and increase their consumption of sugary drinks and junk foods, according to a small Italian study published this past spring in the journal *Obesity*.

Another study published in the spring in *Obesity* projected that the pandemic would likely double out-of-school time this year, exacerbating all the risk factors for weight gain associated with summer recess.

Cardel noted that there is a lack of hard data at this point regarding children's weight gain during the pandemic, and that "these suppositions are nothing without the data."

"We need to focus on acquiring the data and to identify evidence-based strategies to help our children be their healthiest selves—and that includes physical, mental and emotional health," Cardel said.

There are several strategies that parents concerned about their kids' weight can implement, Cardel and Lee said.

"The parents have to take control and take responsibility of what is happening now," Lee said. "We have to get away from the fact that, well, it's COVID, everyone's suffering, it's impacting everybody. The parents should be thinking about their family's nutrition as well as their activity

levels."

This might seem easier said than done for parents working from home whose kids are attending virtual classes, said Cardel, herself a mother of two kids ages 3 and 6.

Parents need to set up a healthy diet and physical activity regimen for the entire family, themselves included, starting at the grocery store.

"Kids copy their parents on what they do, and kids don't have buying power when they go to the supermarket," Lee said. "The parents do ultimately have the final say when it comes to bringing these food items home."

"I often like to remind parents that it's their job to provide the food that's available and it's the child's job to decide what they eat and how much they eat," Cardel said. "If a parent is concerned about weight gain during this time, then they should ensure that the easiest option is the healthiest option."

Keep your house stocked with healthy foods like lean sources of protein, whole grains and lots of easy-to-eat fruits and veggies, Cardel and Lee said. Refrain from buying junk food.

Parents also should set guidelines around when the family will eat and snack, to create some of the structure from which kids benefit at school.

Physical activity also is important, and not just for the kids.

"People have more anxiety and more depression right now than they did pre-COVID," Cardel said. "It's beneficial for the whole family to integrate [physical activity](#) and body movement throughout the course of their day."

Outdoor activity remains a safe option during the pandemic, so people can get movement in through hikes, bike rides and playing in the park, Cardel and Lee said.

Finally, parents should try to limit screen time in the house. This could be tough, Lee said, since harried working-at-home [parents](#) often find handheld devices and TV an easy way to distract the kids.

"You really have to start thinking about alternative bargaining tools, by not using technology or junk food," Lee said.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more about [childhood obesity](#).

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