

Healthy Teen Weight Behaviors Linked to Regular Self-Weighing

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In a study of 130 overweight adolescents, researchers at the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine found that frequent self-weighing is associated with positive behaviors and may prove to be a useful weight-control tool.

Kerri N. Boutelle, PhD, associate professor of pediatrics and psychiatry at UC San Diego and Rady Children's Hospital, San Diego, and colleagues set out to assess relationships between the frequency of self-weighing and weight-control behaviors among teens with a history of being overweight. Their results are published in this month's issue of *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

"We think that regular weight monitoring may increase a teen's awareness of weight fluctuations or gradual weight gain, enabling him or her to appropriately adjust their diet and exercise," said Boutelle. "It's a process called self-regulation, which is not about the weight; it's about paying attention."

Previous research suggested that adults who are successful at managing their weight monitor their food intake, physical activity and weight. Adults who are most successful at long-term weight loss report weighing themselves at least once a week.

However, some studies suggested that frequent self-weighing in teens could be predictive of unhealthy weight control behaviors, suggesting that unintended consequences could include body dissatisfaction, possibly leading to eating disorders. Boutelle's study instead showed that frequent self-weighing was associated with a higher rate of healthy weight-control behaviors, such as increased exercise and increased intake of fruits and vegetables.

"We found that adolescents with a history of being overweight, who self-weighed at least weekly, were four times as likely to report engaging in healthy weight-control behaviors," said Boutelle. "They also reported less daily calorie intake, less junk-food consumption and greater use of a structured diet."

The study looked at 130 males and females, 12 to 20 years old, with a body mass index (BMI) in the 85th or higher percentile. Participants were asked how often they weighed themselves: never,

once a year or less, every few months, every month or week or day, or more than once a day. Forty-two percent of the group reported weighing themselves “frequently” (ranging from several times a day to once a week.)

The teens completed a survey that assessed healthy behaviors such as adding fruits and vegetables to their diet, drinking more water, walking and climbing stairs more frequently, or watching less television. The survey also asked participants to report unhealthy weight control behaviors such as fasting, skipping meals and smoking cigarettes.

Boutelle says that further studies are needed to explore the relationships between self-weighing, weight-control behaviors and psychological well-being among overweight adolescent.

“Given the high prevalence of obesity among teens, and the high risk of this obesity continuing into adulthood, finding effective weight-control strategies for youth is important,” she said. “We hope that early intervention may lessen the grave health consequences associated with adult obesity.”

Additional contributors to the paper include Mary E. Alm, PhD; Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, PhD, MPH, RD; and Mary Story, PhD, RD, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

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