

## **Study: Obesity higher in rural kids than city kids**

**By Geri Nikolai**

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ROCKFORD, ILL. — Here's a surprise: Children growing up in rural areas are more likely to be overweight or obese than their city counterparts. That's the conclusion drawn by researchers at the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Rockford after reviewing Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data on 46,000 children.

Of those, nearly 8,000, or 18 percent, were overweight or obese.

And rural children were 25 percent more likely to have weight issues than city children, said Dr. Martin Lipsky, regional dean of the college and co-author of the study.

"If you look at poor children in the Third World, rural kids are thinner than city kids. That's not true here," he said.

He and Dr. M. Nawal Lutfiyya of the college's Department of Family and Community Medicine initiated the study after seeing reports that rural adults are heavier than urban adults.

"We don't know the reasons why," Lipsky said. "Rural children may have less access to healthier foods. There may be a fast-food restaurant in small towns, but not other types of restaurants. They may lack diversity in fresh fruits and vegetables in their markets. Sometimes there is less opportunity for physical activity like sports, a sidewalk to walk on or even having to park far away from an event and walk."

The study will be published in the September issue of Obesity Research, and Lipsky hopes other researchers follow up to define why this is true and what can be done about it.

"The majority of heavy children, especially if they're heavy in adolescence, grow up to be heavy adults, and we know that correlates strongly with heart disease, diabetes, hypertension and other health issues," he said.

"There are consequences during childhood, too. Being overweight is harmful to muscular skeletal systems, and there are psychological consequences."

The study also is important to policymakers, Lipsky said: County commissioners, and leaders of towns and schools in rural areas need to think about such things as diet and an active lifestyle when planning communities and school programs.

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