

# Key Facts About Childhood Obesity in the Latino Community

Obesity is a chronic disease that currently affects nearly one-third of the adult American population, 15.5% of adolescents (ages 12-19), and 15.3% of children (ages 6-11). Obesity in children and adolescents has many health and social consequences that often continue into adulthood; the increase in obesity rates for children has been especially significant, rising from 5-7% to more than 15% in just two decades.

Latinos and their children have been particularly affected by the growing prevalence of overweight and obesity. In 2005, at least one in four Hispanic adults living in the U.S. was obese (having a Body Mass Index of 30 or more). More than one in six (16.8%) Hispanic high school students is overweight. Hispanics' rates of being overweight are significantly higher than White high schoolers (11.8%) and about the same as Blacks (16.0%) of the same age. An additional

16.7% of Hispanic high school youth are at risk of becoming overweight. This trend continues among even young Latinos. Mexican American children (ages 6-11) are more likely to be overweight than non-Hispanic Black children and non-Hispanic White children (24%, 20%, and 12%, respectively). Even at the preschool level, Mexican Americans are more likely to be overweight (11%) than their non-Hispanic Black (8%) and White (10%) counterparts.<sup>1</sup>

As the largest racial and ethnic minority population in the United States, Latinos are also the youngest; more than 34% of the U.S. Latino population in 2004 were under the age of 18. As Latino children are a major segment of the Latino population and make up a significant portion of obese or overweight children in the U.S., this problem is widespread and must become a major focus for the community and the nation.

Race	Children (Ages 6 to 11) Prevalence (%)		Adolescents (Ages 12 to 19) Prevalence (%)	
	Overweight	Obese	Overweight	Obese
Black (Non-Hispanic)	35.9	19.5	40.4	23.6
Mexican American	39.3	23.7	43.8	23.4
White (Non-Hispanic)	26.2	11.8	26.5	12.7

Source: CDC, National Center for Health Statistics, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. Ogden et. al. JAMA. 2002; 288:1728-1732.

<sup>1</sup> The majority of national data measuring prevalence of overweight and obesity in the Latino population, collect data among the Mexican American community, the largest subgroup of Latinos in the United States. While these data can be used to roughly note trends in the Latino community, they do not reflect the full diversity of the Latino population in the United States.

## Who is at risk of obesity?

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Obesity rates tend to follow a socioeconomic slope and have a greater effect on people with limited resources, racial-ethnic minorities, and the poor.

### Risk factors for being overweight include:

- ▶ Genetics: Children of obese or overweight parents are at greater risk of becoming obese or overweight. Hispanic adults experience high rates of obesity and their children are likely to be obese, as well.
- ▶ Diminished physical activity: Nearly half (47.6%) of all Hispanics live in central city households which often lack opportunities to be physically active and lack resources for proper wellness care. Many poor urban families typically live in neighborhoods where getting exercise and being able to play outside is less feasible and even dangerous.
- ▶ Greater reliance on high-calorie and high-fat foods generally associated with poverty and food insecurity: Food insecurity affects 21.7% of Latino households compared to 8.6% of non-Hispanic White households. Access to quality foods and nutrition is important in overall health and nutritional well-being; many families with lower incomes and food insecurities purchase and consume foods with lower nutritional value and higher calories and fat content. With less security of adequate nutrition, Latino adults and children are more at risk of being overweight or obese.

## What are the effects of obesity on the community?

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The health risks that result from overweight and obesity can significantly contribute to rising costs in health care. Obesity is a risk factor for many health complications, including low self-esteem and depression, type 2 diabetes, pulmonary complications such as asthma, sleep apnea, hypertension, cardiovascular disease and conditions, some cancers, and arthritis. In 2003, the estimated costs of health complications that resulted from obesity were \$75 billion and continue to grow.

Teenage weight is often predictive of adult weight; it is thus important to begin addressing overweight and obesity issues at an early age. Children are at higher risk of a variety of

adverse health effects associated with being overweight and obese, including:

- ▶ Asthma
- ▶ High blood insulin levels leading to type 2 diabetes
- ▶ Elevated blood pressure levels
- ▶ Increased stress on bones and cartilage resulting in poor development of each one, as well as cause pain and limit range of motion
- ▶ Sleep apnea
- ▶ Psychosocial consequences, including low self-esteem

## What can be done to help prevent obesity?

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It is important to teach healthy eating behaviors and exercise models early in a child's life since what we experience as children often contributes significantly to our habits as adults. However, as long as Latinos continue to face challenges accessing quality, affordable, and healthy foods, in conjunction with limited opportunity to be physically active, it will be difficult to fight the growing epidemic of obesity and

decrease the health risks that are associated with being overweight. Policies which shore up access to food assistance, break down enrollment barriers, enhance culturally-competent nutrition counseling, and encourage physical activity all play an important role in ensuring that Latino households can greatly enhance their health and well-being.

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