

Healthy Youth: Physical Activity & Good Nutrition



FACING THE ISSUES

- Nearly 9 million young people 6–19 years of age (15%) are overweight, and more than 33% of high school students do not engage in regular, vigorous physical activity.
- Although most states and schools require some physical activity, only one state requires it daily from kindergarten through twelfth grade.
- Young people who are overweight are more likely to be overweight or obese as adults.
- Good health behaviors started early in life can persist into adulthood and help prevent serious health problems throughout a lifetime.

CDC's Prevention Research Centers work with schools, families, and community organizations to develop and test programs and activities that encourage physical activity and healthy eating among young people.

School-Based Programs

Several Prevention Research Centers (PRCs) collaborate with schools to develop and test programs that increase physical activity and promote diets rich in fruits and vegetables. Physical activity and good nutrition can help build healthy bones, contribute to good mental health (e.g., high self-esteem and low levels of anxiety and stress), and prevent overweight and obesity.

Researchers at another PRC developed a curriculum to help build knowledge and skills about healthy nutrition and physical activity among local students in grades 2–4. In addition to classroom activities, health advisors provided counseling and motivation to help the students' families set and act on nutrition and physical activity goals. Participants' skills and behaviors improved in both areas.

Researchers at one PRC developed and tested Planet Health, a program that incorporates health education into language arts, math, science, social studies, and physical education classes for students in grades 6–8. Evaluation showed that 90% of teachers who trained in and used the program believed it had a good effect on their students and wanted to continue using it. Researchers have expanded the program to include curricula for fourth- and fifth-grade students. Twenty-two schools in the Boston area use the program, and 2,000 additional copies of Planet Health materials have been purchased by people in 48 states and 20 countries.

Pathways, another school-based PRC program, focuses on American Indian children. The program incorporates traditional storytelling, music, games, and holistic health practices to promote new health behaviors. More than 1,700 children in grades 3–5 in seven American Indian nations have participated. The program has reduced the fat content of many school meals and has had a positive effect on children's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to healthy living.

Other PRC school-based programs have helped change school nutrition and physical activity policies. In 2001, CATCH (Coordinated



The Prevention Research Centers are a network of academic health centers, partner communities, and public health practitioners that conduct community-based participatory research to prevent disease and disability.

Approach to Child Health) contributed to passage of a bill in the Texas state legislature authorizing the state Board of Education to require all school systems in Texas to provide 30 minutes per day of school-based physical activity and to implement a coordinated school health curriculum.

Researchers at another PRC are assessing walk-to-school (WTS) programs that aim to increase daily physical activity by encouraging children to walk in groups accompanied by adults. Using information from a national registry of WTS programs, researchers are studying how children's participation is affecting their weight and physical fitness.

Healthy Environments

Although physical activity is important for healthy development, many communities are not designed to support it. The PRCs conduct research on environmental factors that may influence the health and health behaviors of young people.

Researchers at one PRC are exploring whether changes in the physical environment (i.e., availability of sidewalks and bicycle paths, road safety, and access to recreational facilities) and transportation systems (options, quality, and convenience) affect adolescents' physical activity levels and weight. Researchers at another PRC are looking at similar environmental factors but are inter-

ested in where adolescents live (distance from available resources) and its influence on activity and weight. In a third PRC community,

Spotlight on Success

CATCH is a comprehensive school health program that involves a child's entire community (i.e., parents, teachers, nutritionists, school staff, and community partners) and has multiple components that reinforce healthy behaviors throughout a child's day. CATCH has reduced the quantity of fat in school meals, increased activity levels during physical education classes, and improved students' eating and physical activity behaviors. The program reaches more than 750,000 elementary school children in over 1,500 schools in Texas. Researchers recently updated CATCH materials and produced a new diabetes education workbook for elementary school children. Work with community partners continues to further the adoption of CATCH in seven states. The program has been adapted for low-income Hispanic communities. For more information, visit the CATCH Web site: www.sph.uth.tmc.edu/catch.

neighborhood groups, families, and young people are being asked whether the availability of recreational resources and other environmental

factors influences young people's participation in physical activity. In many urban areas, the opportunities for after-school physical activities for young people are far less than in surrounding suburban areas. One PRC study found that African American and Hispanic young people had fewer opportunities for physical activity and lower levels of participation than did whites. This PRC is working with the local city government and community organizations to increase physical activity opportunities inside and outside area schools and to provide such opportunities equally throughout the city.

Researchers at another PRC are developing a tool to help public agencies assess residents' physical activity levels and determine if recreational resources and physical activity programs are needed to help children and adolescents be more active.