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July 16, 2008

Does Eating at Abuela's Make Children Fat?

By Ingrid Sturgis

Hispanic children who eat at the homes of friends or relatives are more likely to gain weight, according to a study by **San Diego State University**. The report, recently published in the research journal "Obesity," is part of a larger study (The San Diego Grocery Store Project) to prevent excess weight gain in children by partnering with restaurants, schools and grocery stores.

It looked at other environmental factors that can place children at risk for obesity, such as eating away from home at the homes of friends, relatives and neighbors.

Guadalupe X. Ayala, associate professor at the San Diego Graduate School for Public Health, who conducted the study in conjunction with the San Diego Center for Prevention Research, said although it is known that eating at fast food restaurants can be a factor in obesity, less known is how relationships with friends, family or neighbors can be a factor in childhood obesity.

The study, focused on children in kindergarten through 2nd grade from 13 Southern California elementary schools, is one of the first to examine the impact of close family ties on children's eating habits. Ayala said that eating away from home once a week or more at a relative, neighbor or friend put a child at higher risk for obesity.

"We know we eat foods in other locations as well," Ayala said. "A lot of food is consumed with family, at the homes of friends and neighbors. Eating frequently in that context places child or adult at risk for obesity."

"One of the reason we wanted to study this is that cultures that are family-oriented want to get together to share ideas, share time together and often that time together revolves around food," she said. "We look forward to going to grandma's house or auntie's house. And auntie and grandma are often waiting for you with all this delicious food, which gives them an opportunity to spoil you. The problem is these mini-celebrations tend to occur more frequently than we often think."

Ayala said the study also considered low-income families or family who live in poverty who do not always use formal sources of child care. "To what extent does going to friends, relatives or neighbors for child care put children at risk for obesity?" Ayala wondered. She was careful to note, however, this hypothesis doesn't negate other research that shows that these same family networks are important for survival.

Eating out more frequently seemed to put a child at greater risk but not an adult,

Ayala said.

"Interestingly, when we look at these two hypotheses, it seems to be that the issue of childhood obesity may be more related to child care," Ayala says.

Youngsters who ate away from home often consumed one or more servings of sugar-sweetened beverages or sweet and savory snacks, such as chips and ice cream, according to the study. In addition, children in child care may receive more snacks to tide them over until dinner.

The study recruited families with children from kindergarten to second grade in an effort to curb excess weight gain at an early age. The study, which happened to recruit more female children, was a little different from national statistics, which indicated that Mexican American boys were more at risk for obesity than girls or children in other ethnic groups.

Several other factors can contribute to excess weight gain in childhood, including the length of time a family has been in the United States. Ayala says the study found that more Americanized Hispanic families were eating out more often. The longer they lived in the United States, the more English they spoke, the more TV they watched and the more American food they ate, the more they went out to eat in general.

Other data, Ayala says, found that newer immigrants who realized improved economic status tended to use food to celebrate their successes. The respondents in the study said, "I know I made it in the United States if I can afford to take my family out to eat." Or, Ayala said, they may celebrate with more traditional foods but eat more of it.

Globalization also is having an impact on eating habits, Ayala says, with the United States leading the world in obesity and Mexico coming in second.

To counter the trend to obesity, Ayala says intervention has been successful in improving parenting skills, particularly in young families with limited cooking skills. Another project at SDSU will work with fathers to help with their shopping skills and mothers to work with family members to prepare healthier foods. "If we don't engage everybody, it won't last," Ayala says.