

Study highlights obesity levels in children

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Organisation (WHO) European Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative (COSI), that involved 17 European countries.

'There has previously been a lack of national data on the prevalence of overweight and obesity in children both in Sweden and internationally,' said Agneta Sjöberg, researcher at the Sahlgrenska Academy's Public Health Epidemiology Unit. 'This is the first national survey of the prevalence of overweight and obesity among schoolchildren to be carried out in Sweden.'

She highlighted that 'we've now got a national figure for the prevalence of overweight and obesity in 7 to 9 year olds,' noting that '17 per cent were overweight, including 3 per cent who were obese'.

The study involved collecting data from 94 randomly chosen schools from the north to the south of Sweden and included 4,600 children aged between 7 and 9 years old.

The researchers also observed a lower prevalence of overweight and obesity among children who live in urban areas compared to those in smaller towns and rural areas. 'This is because more highly-educated people live in the big cities than in smaller towns and rural areas,' said Dr Sjöberg. She added that 'we found that the difference

in the prevalence of overweight and obesity depends largely on the general level of education in the area where the children live'. Indeed, the research team noted that it is already well known that overweight and obesity are more common in children in areas with a low socioeconomic status than in areas where much of the population has a high socioeconomic status.

Overweight and obesity in childhood often follow people into adulthood and put them at a greater risk of poor health in the future. The researchers believe that it is therefore important to identify groups who are at greatest risk and who would therefore benefit from health campaigns. Previous studies have shown that the need for such campaigns is greatest in urban areas where much of the population has a low socioeconomic status. 'On the basis of our results, we think it would also be beneficial to run health campaigns and work preventatively in smaller towns and rural areas,' insisted Dr Sjöberg.

COSI was launched after EU Member States recognised in 2005 the need for standardised and harmonised surveillance systems on which to base policies to tackle obesity within Europe. The first data collection took place during the school year 2007/2008, with 13 countries and regions participating - namely the Flemish region of Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia and Sweden. The second round took place from spring to autumn 2010 in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, Hungary and Spain.

Although each country is free to develop a system that fits its local circumstances, data must be collected according to a common agreed protocol containing core items. Core measurements include body weight and body height - waist and hip circumference are optional - along with associated co-morbidities, dietary intake and physical activity patterns. The system is designed to be simple and not to require a major investment of public resources. For more information, please visit: WHO - Europe: <http://www.euro.who.int/en/home> University of Gothenburg <http://www.gu.se/english>

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