



Data on obesity rates questioned

I've read the news that the obesity rate among preschoolers has dropped, but that some are skeptical. What's the issue?

It sounds like you're referring to data published Feb. 26 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

"Prevalence of Childhood and Adult Obesity in the United States, 2011-2012" reported that obesity rates for children ages 2 through 5 had dropped 43 percent in the last decade. At least, that's what most of the headlines focused on.

You can't really blame the media for the excitement: They were just reporting what the experts were saying about the study. But there is more to the findings and reason to be wary.

The data came from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, or NHANES, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. NHANES collects information from thousands of ordinary Americans and reports results every two years.

When researchers looked specifically at the data about 2- to 5-year-olds, they saw that obesity rates had declined from 13.9 percent in 2003-04 to 8.4 percent in 2011-12. While that's a good sign, you're right: Some are cautious about this finding.

One reason is that the decline hasn't been a steady one. In 2003-04, the obesity rate for children 2 through 5 was 13.9 percent. It dropped to 10.7 percent in 2005-06 and again slightly to 10.1 percent in 2007-08. But it rose

rather significantly in 2009-10 to 12.1 percent, before the latest decline to 8.4 percent. Before declaring victory, some experts would like a few more years of data to see if the good news can be verified.

Another reason for concern is that the obesity rate for children of all ages (2 through 19) remained high at 17.7 percent, as did the rate for adults, 34.9 percent. Those figures did not show a decrease between 2003-04 and 2011-12.

Still, it's becoming increasingly clear how important it is to focus on a healthy weight in young children. Another recent study, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* Jan. 30, reported that children who are overweight at age 5 may face four times the risk of becoming obese at age 14. It appears that preventing obesity from taking a foothold in the early years would be more helpful than encouraging older children — or adults — to lose weight later.

Experts caution that for young children, the emphasis should be on eating healthfully and increasing activity rather than shedding pounds. For guidance, see the CDC's "Tips for Parents: Ideas to Help Children Maintain a Healthy Weight" at <http://bit.ly/cdctips>.

Chow Line is a service of Ohio State University's College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Chow Line, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH, 43210-1043, or filipic.3@osu.edu.



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Editor:

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