Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
PolicyLab

Objective and Perceived Weight: Associations with Risky Adolescent Sexual Behavior

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CONTEXT: Studies have shown that obesity is associated with increased sexual risk-taking, particularly among adolescent females, but the relationships between obesity, perceived weight and sexual risk behaviors are poorly understood.

METHODS: Integrative data analysis was performed that combined baseline data from the 1994-1995 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (from 17,606 respondents in grades 7-12) and the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (from 7,752 respondents aged 12-16). Using six sexual behaviors measured in both data sets (age at first intercourse, various measures of contraceptive use and number of partners), cluster analysis was conducted that identified five distinct behavior clusters. Multivariate ordinal logistic regression analysis examined associations between adolescents' weight status (categorized as underweight, normal-weight, overweight or obese) and weight perception and their cluster membership.

RESULTS: Among males, being underweight, rather than normal-weight, was negatively associated with membership in increasingly risky clusters (odds ratio, 0.5), as was the perception of being overweight, as opposed to about the right weight (0.8). However, being overweight was positively associated with males' membership in increasingly risky clusters (1.3). Among females, being obese, rather than normal-weight, was negatively correlated with membership in increasingly risky clusters (0.8), while the perception of being overweight was positively correlated with such membership (1.1).

CONCLUSIONS: Both objective and subjective assessments of weight are associated with the clustering of risky sexual behaviors among adolescents, and these behavioral patterns differ by gender.

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