Overweight, Obesity Start Early in Urban Youth

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TORONTO — A critical period for the development of obesity in early childhood appears to be between the ages of 1 and 3 years, according to a study of inner-city youth presented at the annual meeting of the Pediatric Academic Societies.

In 1,713 children aged 1-5 years, overweight increased from a low of 4% in 1-year-olds to 21% in 5-year-olds. Obesity increased from a low of 8% in 1-year-olds to 30% in 5-year-olds, said Dr. Melissa Glassman, a pediatrician at Columbia University Medical Center and Morgan-Stanley Children's Hospital of New York–Presbyterian, both in New York.

The researchers saw significant increases in prevalence both between the ages of 1 and 2 years and between ages 2 and 3 years. No statistically significant increases in overweight or obesity prevalence occurred in 3- to 5-year-old children.

The largest increase in overweight and obesity prevalences occurred in children before the age of 3; overweight was 16% and obesity was 30% in 3-year-olds.

Overall, boys were slightly more likely to be obese than were girls. No significant differences were seen based on ethnicity. Dr. Glassman noted that Dominicans were the major subgroup in her study population and that these findings may not be generalizable to other populations. She said that a study based on 2003-2004 NHANES data found a rate of overweight and obesity among 2- to 5-year-old children of 26%.

"The critical age period encompasses a major transition period for children, when they develop and establish food preferences and eating behaviors," Dr. Glassman said in a statement. When asked how physicians can help, she said that encouraging parents to make adjustments to their children's diet and exercise patterns would allow some of these children to "outgrow" their excess weight. ■