



The Royal Australasian
College of Physicians

MEDIA RELEASE

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New research finds 20% of Australian preschool children are overweight or obese : RACP Congress

An alarming number of young children can be classified as overweight or obese in Australia, and the more disadvantaged are most at risk. The findings from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children are being presented by Associate Professor Melissa Wake, from the Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, to The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) Annual Congress in Cairns today.

The study is the first Australia-wide survey looking specifically at the weight of preschoolers. The study included 4,983 children aged from 4 to 5 years old and was conducted during 2004. The children's weight was classified according to the International Obesity Taskforce definitions and waist circumference percentiles.

"We found that 15.2% of these preschoolers are overweight and 5.5% are obese. This study provides clear evidence that the obesity epidemic is affecting very young children right across Australia – not just school-age children. Increased public health measures to combat the obesity epidemic in young children are urgently needed," A/Prof Wake said.

"Overweight and obesity was high in all groups, but the children most likely to be overweight or obese were socially disadvantaged and of a lower socio-economic status. Getting the message out to parents is important, but it's clear that we also need to look at broader social issues too."

In analysis, characteristics common to those children who were overweight or obese included: language other than English, indigenous status, lower maternal education, lower family income, disadvantaged living area and less skilled parent occupation.

Children in the lowest quintile of social disadvantage had nearly twice the odds of being in a heavier weight category compared to those in the highest quintile. Waist circumference was not strongly related to any socioeconomic variable.

"We've known for a long time that obesity solutions are needed for the whole population. This new research suggests that we also need a much better understanding of just how social disadvantage alters 'obesogenic' behaviours, and of specific neighbourhood characteristics that promote healthy and unhealthy weight gain in young children," A/Prof Wake said.

The RACP is responsible for training, educating and representing over 9,000 physicians in Australia and New Zealand. The RACP represents 25 medical sub-specialties including paediatrics, public health and occupational medicine. Physicians are often called medical specialists. They are doctors who have completed an extra eight years or more of training after their initial university medical training. Patients are generally referred to a physician by a general practitioner seeking expert medical advice.

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