

Premature death is more likely in obese children

By Nanci Hellmich, USA TODAY

This week, first lady [Michelle Obama](#) announced a national campaign to combat childhood obesity, and now a new study shows that obese children are more likely to die prematurely than their healthy-weight peers.

The research adds to growing evidence of the health risks of childhood obesity.

MICHELLE OBAMA: [Aims to end childhood obesity in a generation](#)

ON THE WEB: See [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) 5, 2, 1, 0 'prescription' for kids

CHAT: [Dietitian Elizabeth Ward answered your questions](#)

About 32% of children and teens are obese or overweight, the government says. Those extra pounds put children at a greater risk of developing diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and other health problems.

An analysis in 2005 found that children today may lead shorter lives by two to five years than their parents because of obesity.

The latest data come from a [National Institutes of Health](#) study that began in 1965. Researchers tracked 4,857 American Indian children in Arizona for an average of 24 years.

Among the findings, which are published in today's *NewEngland Journal of Medicine*: Children who were the heaviest — the top fourth — were more than twice as likely to die early from natural causes, such as alcoholic liver disease, cardiovascular disease, infections, cancer and diabetes, as children whose weight put them in the lowest quarter of the population.

Most of the heaviest children were obese, which is defined as a body mass index (BMI) in the 95th percentile or higher on growth charts.

The deaths from alcoholic liver disease may have been caused by a combination of alcohol intake, obesity (which is associated with fatty liver disease) and other liver toxins or viruses, says researcher William Knowler of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, part of [NIH](#). Scientists could not determine how many years obesity may shorten lives because most of the participants were still alive, so the average life span of the group wasn't known yet, he says.

The message to parents: "Obesity in children can be a serious, life-long problem," Knowler says. If doctors tell parents to do something about their child's obesity, "they should take it very seriously."

Pediatric endocrinologist David Ludwig of Children's Hospital in Boston says the early deaths may be because "obesity adversely affects not just one risk factor like cholesterol but a whole host of them, including high blood pressure, high blood sugar and chronic inflammation in the body."

Dietitian answered your questions

Registered dietitian [Elizabeth Ward](#), a USA TODAY Weight-Loss Challenge blogger, answered questions on healthy exercise and eating options for your children from 1-2 p.m. ET, Thursday.

