

Town goes on a diet to curb childhood obesity

Study shows Somerville kids avoided gaining extra weight

By RODRIQUE NGOWI

The Associated Press

SOMERVILLE, Mass. — More fruits and vegetables were added to school lunches. Restaurants offered smaller portions. Crosswalks even got a fresh coat of paint to encourage walking and biking.

The whole city of Somerville went on a diet to curb childhood obesity. And researchers say it worked.

Tufts University nutrition experts found public schoolchildren in this Boston suburb avoided gaining about a pound of excess weight

compared with their 8-year-old counterparts in two nearby communities.

The results of the study were published last week in the journal *Obesity*. The report covered the first year of the 2003-04 study involving 1,696 children in first, second and third grades.

If other communities take similar steps, the findings could help children avoid becoming overweight as they grow older, said Christina Economos, who led the program called "Shape Up Somerville: Eat Smart Play Hard."

Researchers picked Somerville, a city of 77,500, because it has a large population of minority children in low-income families. Only 3 percent of the town's land is set aside for children to walk and play safely, a situation that fuels a sedentary lifestyle.

In the weeks before the study, researchers met with parents, teachers and school officials to explain the importance of avoiding meals high in fat and sugar and encouraging children to be active, Economos said.

Children began seeing fresh strawberries, raspberries, blueberries and other fruits in school cafeterias. They were told they could eat as much as they wanted. School cooks started using fresh ingredients instead of frozen foods. They also turned to olive and canola oils and replaced fried foods with baked products, including potatoes with cheese.

More than 90 teachers were taught a new health curriculum, and the program leaders learned yoga, dance and soccer to encourage children to be more active before, during and after school.

Many pediatricians don't track kids' body mass index

Survey: Few doctors feel they can treat obese children effectively

By MELISSA HEALY

The Los Angeles Times

With a bit of early intervention, a pediatrician can nip a lifetime of fat-related health problems in the bud.

But a new study finds that pediatricians are failing in large numbers to take step one in the manual of fat prevention — calculating

a child's body mass index, or BMI. In a survey of 400 patients' charts at an academic medical center, researchers from Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center found that pediatricians had calculated BMI for roughly 1 in 20 children ages 5 to 11.

The American Academy of Pediatrics in 2003 recommended that pediatricians screen all patients for risk of obesity by calculating their BMI every year. "It's easy," says Dr. Jennifer Hillman, lead author of the study, to be presented at the Pediatric Academic Societies' annual meeting in Toronto. But four years after the AAP urged

them to start doing BMI calculations routinely, many pediatricians need to be reminded of the measurement's value, Hillman said.

A 2005 survey of pediatricians in North Carolina suggests a few reasons pediatricians have been slow to take up the cudgels against child obesity. Only 12 percent said they felt they had the tools to treat overweight children effectively. Physicians most often complained they could not compete with fast food and sweetened soft drinks and that they lacked materials to educate patients. Many feared offending children and their families.