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Review

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Gendered dimensions of obesity in childhood and adolescence

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Abstract

Background

The literature on childhood and adolescent obesity is vast. In addition to producing a general overview, this paper aims to highlight gender differences or similarities, an area which has tended not to be the principal focus of this literature.

Methods

Databases were searched using the terms 'obesity' and 'child', 'adolescent', 'teenager', 'youth', 'young people', 'sex', 'gender', 'masculine', 'feminine', 'male', 'female', 'boy' and 'girl' (or variations on these terms). In order to limit the potential literature, the main focus is on other reviews, both general and relating to specific aspects of obesity.

Results

The findings of genetic studies are similar for males and females, and differences in obesity rates as defined by body mass index are generally small and inconsistent. However, differences between males and females due to biology are evident in the patterning of body fat, the fat levels at which health risks become apparent, levels of resting energy expenditure and energy requirements, ability to engage in certain physical activities and the consequences of obesity for the female reproductive system. Differences due to society or culture include food choices and dietary concerns, overall physical activity levels, body satisfaction and the long-term psychosocial consequences of childhood and adolescent obesity.

Conclusion

This review suggests differences between males and females in exposure and vulnerability to obesogenic environments, the consequences of child and adolescent obesity, and responses to interventions for the condition. A clearer focus on gender differences is required among both researchers and policy makers within this field.

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