

Urban planning a factor in rising obesity rates, says new report

You may want to buy healthy food for your family, but if the good grocery stores are far away and pricey and the fast-food outlets are cheap and plentiful, it may be harder to make the healthy choice. Research led by the University of Alberta and funded by the Canadian Institute for Health Information confirms there are links between our urban surroundings and how likely we are to struggle with obesity.

The startling rise in obesity rates in North America over the past two decades has led to calls for more effective approaches to help people achieve healthy weights. The State of the Evidence Review on Urban Health and Healthy Weights, released to the public this week, synthesizes the findings of hundreds of population health studies published over the years and shines a spotlight on aspects of our urban environments that can either inhibit or promote our ability to maintain a healthy weight.

“Two key areas we looked at were economic environments and built environments—meaning the ways in which the neighbourhoods and the cities in which we live are planned and developed,” said Kim Raine, director of the University of Alberta’s Centre for Health Promotion Studies and lead author of the report.

“When we reviewed the evidence we found, for example, that lower-income neighbourhoods were more likely to have greater access to sources of high-calorie foods, such as fast-food outlets, and lower access to supermarkets or other stores stocking healthy foods,” explained Raine. The report also found that a lower socio-economic status—which involves education level, income and employment—was often associated with increased obesity among both adults and children. “Lower personal income affects the affordability of food,” Raine said, “and that has been shown to have the most consistent influence on what people eat.”

The walkability of neighbourhoods and access to recreational facilities in and around neighbourhoods may also assist in promoting healthy weights, according to the report. “Some hallmarks of walkability are increased residential density, mixed-use zoning and street connectivity,” said co-author John Spence from the U of A’s Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation. “Conversely, factors such as urban sprawl, low intersection density, low residential density and low land-use mix tend also to favour sedentary behaviour and lower physical activity levels and promote obesity.”

The report also found that individuals living in middle-income to high-income neighbourhoods were more likely to be physically active than their counterparts in lower-income neighbourhoods.

Raine, Spence and their fellow researchers conclude that interventions aimed at improving the income and educational status of individuals and families within urban environments may help address these disparities in obesity. “And improving access to healthy foods and recreation opportunities in lower-income neighbourhoods can also help to create a ‘healthy weight’-friendly environment,” Spence said.

Source: University of Alberta

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