

## Study: More Babies Are Overweight

By Nanci Hellmich  
USA TODAY

More babies are heavy now than 20 years ago, which could bode ill for their health, according to one of the first studies to look at overweight infants. The finding is controversial because some experts say there's no clear definition of overweight in the first two years of life.

The study, reported in the journal *Obesity*, says the percentage of babies under 6 months old who were overweight or on the brink of becoming so increased from 10.4% in 1980 to 17% in 2001. The percentage of heavy toddlers and preschoolers also increased substantially. "The prevalence of overweight is rising in our very youngest children, even our infants," says lead researcher Matthew Gillman of Harvard Medical School.

Other experts challenge these results. "We don't have a definition of overweight for children under 2, so these conclusions are questionable," says Jamie Calabrese, a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics' task force on obesity. "Babies have periods of time when they gain weight and periods where they have accelerated growth, so they may appear chubby at times and at other times appear thinner due to rapid growth in height."

Gillman says some government researchers have used the same criteria to define overweight in infants and young children. "The important point is the trends are upward."

Although people consider chubby babies "cute and healthy", those extra pounds could carry health risks later in life, he says. Overweight babies who become heavy children are at a greater risk of health problems such as type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure.

Many factors may be contributing to the increase in weight among infants, Gillman says. "Mothers are going into pregnancy heavier than ever before. Some are more likely to develop gestational diabetes, which means they are more likely to have heavy babies."

Although his study didn't look at birth weights, he says, the research suggests more heavy babies are being born today than 20 years ago.

And parents may be pushing too much food on their kids. "We oversnack our children nowadays," Calabrese says. "People use food as a calming mechanism. They use food as a comfort measure. Those are two very bad reasons to give your child food."

Babies usually quit when full, "but every parent knows that babies can be urged to eat a little more even after they seem full," says pediatrician William Dietz of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Parents have to use prudent feeding practices, and use infant foods, not fast foods. Some infants are being fed french fries."

Breast-feeding seems to protect against excess weight gain. "The longer the better," Dietz says, "But even breast-feeding for a week or two seems to have some benefit."