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Daycare attendance as a protective factor against obesity in children younger than five years

Gyovana Lara Moraes de Lima, Simone Holzer de Moraes
Centro Universitário FMABC, Santo André, Brazil
gyovanalara9@hotmail.com

INTRODUCTION: The marked increase in pediatric obesity is associated with exposure to an obesogenic environment. This study assessed the association between risk factors and excess weight among children younger than five years. **METHOD:** A cross-sectional study was conducted with 140 children younger than five years who attended daycare centers in the municipality of Santo André. Family history, dietary intake, and anthropometric measurements (weight and height) were assessed to calculate anthropometric indicators. **RESULTS:** In the study population, 27 children (19.29%) had excess weight. Any breastfeeding was reported for 122 children (88.41%); 31 (26.05%) were exclusively breastfed for up to four months, and 27 (23.08%) were breastfed for less than six months. Infant formula use was reported for 90 children (65.22%). Regarding food intake outside daycare, 98 (75.97%), 90 (68.70%), and 111 (84.73%) reported high consumption of sweets, high-fat foods, and sugar-sweetened beverages, respectively. The variables studied were not significantly associated with excess weight and obesity among the children assessed, even after stratification into those younger than 24 months and those aged 24 to 60 months. **DISCUSSION:** In this study, breastfeeding for less time than recommended by the Brazilian Ministry of Health and unhealthy eating habits outside daycare did not emerge as risk factors for excess weight in this age group. The shared daycare environment during most of the day may have been protective through appropriate school meals, a safe environment for play and physical activity, and the curricular inclusion of content related to health promotion and healthy lifestyles for children and their families in an integrated manner. **CONCLUSION:** The daycare routine is probably protective against obesity in children younger than five years, masking the expression of the classic risk factors investigated in this study.

KEYWORDS: Childhood obesity; Diet; Daycare center.