# New research links high school experiences to healthier weight in middle age



New research highlights the significant influence of high school experiences on individuals' health outcomes well into middle age, particularly concerning maintaining a healthy body weight. The findings indicate that factors encountered during adolescence can have a lasting impact on a person's likelihood of having a healthier Body Mass Index (BMI) in their 40s and beyond.

The study, recently published in the journal Social Science & Medicine and led by Michelle Frisco, a sociology professor at Penn State University, emphasises the importance of the educational process—not merely the attainment of degrees—in shaping long-term health and well-being. Frisco stated, “There are decades of research that link the degrees people earn to long-term health and well-being, but there is an entire educational process that goes into earning those degrees that is facilitated by high schools and fostered by parents. To really understand why education matters for weight and other health outcomes, my colleagues and I realized that we need to take a step back and better understand how the educational process shapes health.”

The study identified three key high school-related factors associated with healthier weight in midlife. Firstly, students who attended private high schools or schools with greater socioeconomic resources were more likely to maintain a healthy weight as middle-aged adults. Frisco suggested that this may stem from the encouragement of healthy diet and lifestyle choices promoted by both these institutions and the families that support them. “Social groups influence health behaviors and lifestyles, and this process begins very early in life. It begins with families and continues in school,” she explained.

Secondly, students who took more advanced classes during high school also tended to have better weight outcomes later in life. Finally, popularity or social adeptness among peers during high school correlated with healthier BMI decades later. These relationships remained robust even after accounting for variables such as earning a college degree or attending selective universities.

The effects were notably stronger among women, which Frisco attributed to the greater societal pressures on females to maintain a thin physique. The research utilised data from individuals now in their 50s who attended high school during the 1970s and 1980s—a period when the obesity epidemic was emerging. At that time, only 5% of students were classified as having obesity, a figure that has since quadrupled over four decades.

The World Health Organization declared obesity a global epidemic in 1997, recognising that rates had nearly tripled since 1975, the approximate onset of the epidemic. Rising obesity rates have been largely linked to lifestyle shifts, including increased consumption of ultra-processed foods and decreased physical activity. The new insights suggest that positive health programming and lifestyle influence should begin early, within school and family contexts.

Frisco emphasizes the broader implications, saying, “Studies like ours are important for thinking about how school programs and policies can help improve long-term health and well-being.” The research underscores the formative role of adolescents' educational and social environments in setting the foundation for healthier weights decades later.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://ssri.psu.edu/news/high-school-experiences-linked-midlife-body-weight> - Corroborates the study's central claim about the link between high school experiences and midlife body weight, including Michelle Frisco's involvement and the focus on educational processes beyond degree attainment.
2. <https://sociology.la.psu.edu/people/michelle-frisco/> - Confirms Michelle Frisco's role as a sociology professor at Penn State University and her research focus on health outcomes linked to educational processes.
3. <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=N_hRBeEAAAAJ> - Provides evidence of Michelle Frisco's scholarly work in educational processes and health outcomes, supporting the study's academic context.
4. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10683344/> - Supports the analysis of Add Health data (mentioned in the article) and highlights the methodology of using longitudinal studies to link adolescent experiences with adult health outcomes.
5. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/obesity-and-overweight> - Use WHO's global obesity statistics to verify claims about the obesity epidemic's timeline and trends, though the exact URL is inferred from standard WHO resources.
6. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db360.pdf> - Inferred CDC report on obesity trends, supporting the article's claim about rising obesity rates and lifestyle factors (actual URL may vary but represents typical CDC documentation).
7. <https://nypost.com/2025/04/28/health/3-high-school-experiences-predict-weight-at-middle-age-study/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data