

Opinion: Eating habits start in the womb

By Kristin Wartman, New York Times

The solution to one of America's most vexing problems – our soaring rates of obesity and diet-related diseases – may have its roots in early childhood, and even in utero.

Researchers at the Monell Chemical Senses Center, a nonprofit research organization in Philadelphia, have found that babies born to mothers who eat a diverse and varied diet while pregnant and breast-feeding are more open to a wide range of flavors. They've also found that babies who follow that diet after weaning carry those preferences into childhood and adulthood. Researchers believe that the taste preferences that develop at crucial periods in infancy have lasting effects for life. In fact, changing food preferences beyond toddlerhood appears to be extremely difficult.

“What's really interesting about children is, the preferences they form during the first years of life actually predict what they'll eat later,” said Julie Mennella, a biopsychologist and researcher at the Monell Center. “Dietary patterns track from early to later childhood but once they are formed, once they get older, it's really difficult to change – witness how hard it is to change the adult. You can, but it's just harder. Where you start, is where you end up.”

This may have profound implications for the future health of Americans. With some 70 percent of the United States population now overweight or obese and chronic diseases skyrocketing, many parents who are eating a diet high in processed, refined foods are feeding their babies as they feed themselves, and could be setting their children up for a lifetime of preferences for a narrow range of flavors.

The Monell researchers have identified several sensitive periods for taste preference development. One is before three and a half months of age, which makes what the mother eats while pregnant and breast-feeding so important. "It's our fundamental belief that during evolution, we as humans are exposed to flavors both in utero and via mother's milk that are signals of things that will be in our diets as we grow up and learn about what flavors are acceptable based on those experiences," said Gary Beauchamp, the director of the Monell Center. "Infants exposed to a variety of flavors in infancy are more willing to accept a variety of flavors, including flavors that are associated with various vegetables and so forth and that might lead to a more healthy eating style later on."

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