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Duke researchers show reading can help obese kids lose weight

DURHAM, N.C. -- It's no secret that reading is beneficial. But can it help kids lose weight? In the first study to look at the impact of literature on obese adolescents, researchers at Duke Children's Hospital discovered that reading the right type of novel may make a difference.

The Duke researchers asked obese females ages 9 to 13 who were already in a comprehensive weight loss program to read an age-appropriate novel called *Lake Rescue* (Beacon Street Press). It was carefully crafted with the help of pediatric experts to include specific healthy lifestyle and weight management guidance, as well as positive messages and strong role models.

Six months later, the Duke researchers found the 31 girls who read *Lake Rescue* experienced a significant decrease in their BMI scores (-.71%) when compared to a control group of 14 girls who hadn't (+.05%), explained Alexandra C. Russell, MD, a fourth-year medical student at Duke who led the study and presented the findings at the Obesity Society's annual scientific meeting.

"As a pediatrician, I can't count the number of times I tell parents to buy a book that might provide useful advice, yet I've never been able to point to research to back up my recommendations," says Sarah Armstrong, MD, director of Duke's Healthy Lifestyles Program where the research took place. "This is the first prospective interventional study that found literature can have a positive impact on healthy lifestyle changes in young girls."

Obesity is becoming more prevalent in children, according to the CDC, which reports that 16 percent of children ages 6 to 19 are overweight or obese, a number that has tripled since 1980. Researchers are looking at a variety of ways to help kids stay healthy, lose weight and be more active, but Armstrong says, "most don't work very well. The weight loss options that are effective typically involve taking powerful medications with side effects, or require permanent surgical procedures."



While the BMI decrease attributed to the book is small, Armstrong says any decrease in BMI is encouraging because BMI typically increases in children as they grow and develop. That's okay as long as it follows a normal, progressing curve. In overweight kids, however, BMI usually increases more rapidly. "If their BMI percentile goes down, it means they are either losing weight or getting tall and not gaining weight. Both are seen as positive indicators in kids who are trying to lose weight," she explains.

The idea that a book can positively influence weight loss and decrease BMI is "encouraging because it's fairly easy to implement," she added. "And it's a welcome addition to a world where there aren't a lot of alternatives."

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Terrill D. Bravender, MD, chief of adolescent health at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, OH, contributed to this research during his tenure at Duke.
