

Obesity in East and Central Harlem: A Look Across Generations



A Neighborhood Report from the East and
Central Harlem District Public Health Office



THE NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT
of HEALTH and MENTAL HYGIENE
Michael R. Bloomberg, Mayor
Thomas R. Frieden, M.D., M.P.H., Commissioner

nyc.gov/health

Key Findings

1. Obesity and overweight are common in residents of all ages in East and Central Harlem.

- More than 1 in 4 children in Head Start programs and public elementary schools is obese, and more than 4 in 10 are overweight or obese.
- About 1 in 7 public high school students is obese, and nearly 1 in 3 is overweight or obese.
- More than 1 in 4 adults is obese, and 6 in 10 are overweight or obese.

2. The obesity problem in East and Central Harlem is part of an epidemic affecting all of Manhattan, New York City, and the nation.

- The prevalence of obesity among preschool children in Head Start and public elementary school children is similar in East Harlem, Central Harlem and Manhattan overall.
- The prevalence of obesity among older adults, however, is higher in these Manhattan neighborhoods than in Manhattan as a whole.

3. Many adolescents and adults in East and Central Harlem do not exercise regularly or eat the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables.

- More than 1 in 3 high school students reports not exercising at least 20 minutes a day, 3 days per week. Nearly 6 in 10 watch TV at least 3 hours per day.
- One in 4 adults reports not exercising at all. A similar proportion do not walk or bicycle at least 10 blocks to get to work or school or to run errands.
- More than 8 in 10 adolescents and more than 9 in 10 adults say they eat fewer than 5 servings of fruits and vegetables per day.

Suggested citation: Matte T, Gordon C, Goodman A, Selenic D, Young C, Deitcher D. Obesity in East and Central Harlem: A look across generations. New York, NY: New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, 2007.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks to the following contributors: Donna Eisenhower and Lorna Thorpe (NYC DOHMH Division of Epidemiology), Linda Fiore and Kelly Cantor (NYC DOHMH Division of Health Promotion and Disease Prevention), and John Brunetti and Risa Jaslow (NYC Administration for Children's Services/Head Start).

Appreciation is also expressed to Cortnie Lowe and Lise Stevens of the NYC DOHMH Publications Group.

This Report

Obesity is a major health concern in New York City. It is a problem that crosses generations, affecting children, parents, and grandparents. Being overweight or obese increases the risk for many health problems, including diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, cancer, and heart disease. Maintaining a healthy weight involves getting regular physical activity and eating well – choosing sensible portions of healthy foods. The neighborhood environment, too, plays a role: living in a neighborhood with opportunities for exercise and access to affordable, nutritious foods makes it easier to achieve a healthy weight.

This report examines rates of obesity and overweight among people of all ages living in East and Central Harlem, compared with rates in Manhattan overall and in New York City.

Exercise and diet among East and Central Harlem adolescents and adults are also examined.

Defining Obesity and Overweight

To determine whether a person is overweight or obese, height and weight are used to calculate a body mass index (BMI). Any adult with a BMI between 25 and 29.9 is considered overweight; a BMI of 30 or higher defines adult obesity.

Determining overweight and obesity among children takes age and gender into account. A child with a BMI \geq 85th and < 95th percentile for age and gender is considered overweight. A BMI \geq 95th percentile for age and gender defines childhood obesity.¹

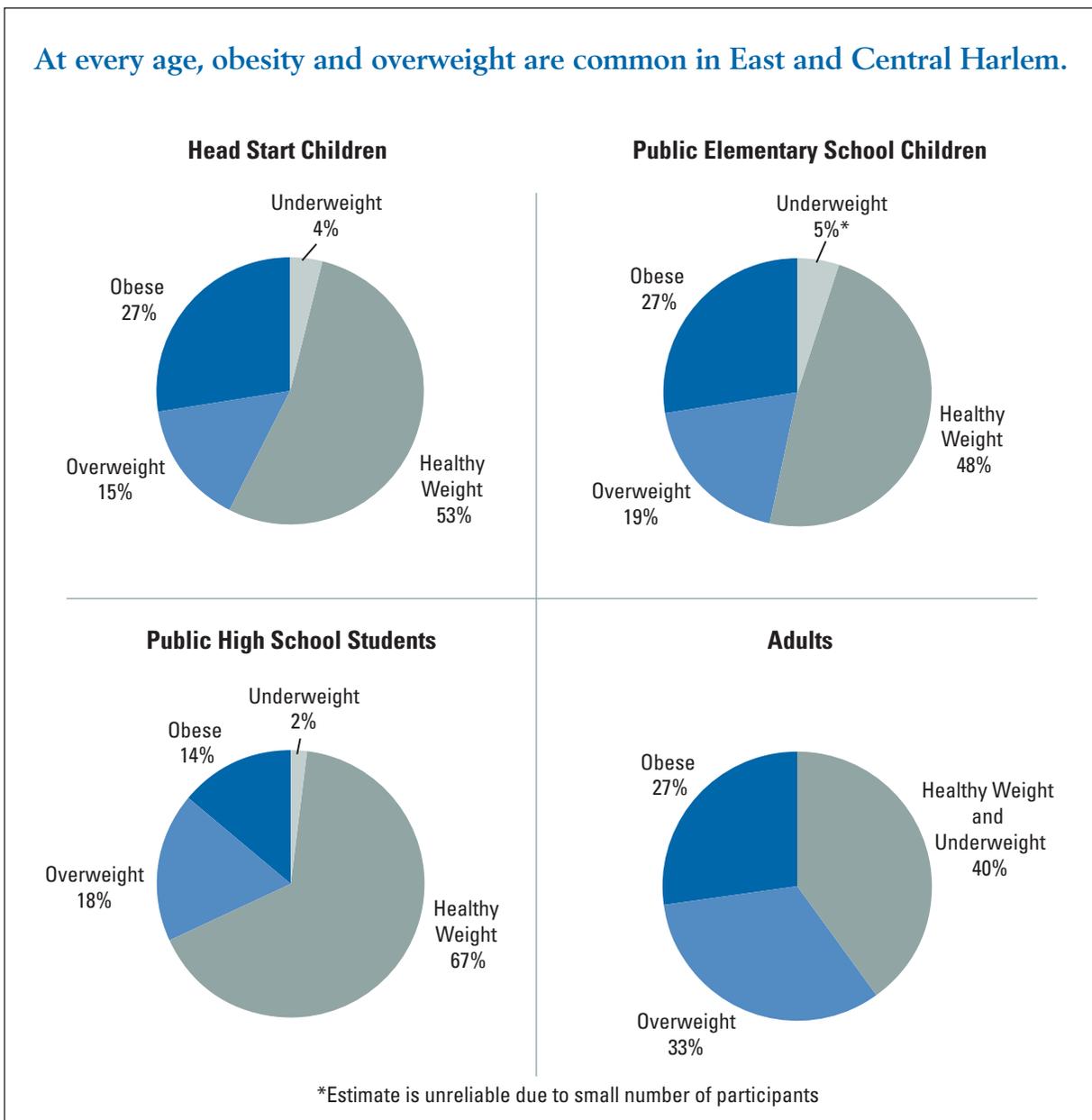
About the Data

Data summarized in this report are drawn from 4 sources.

- Measured heights and weights from children attending Head Start (average age, 3.5 years) were collected from physical exam forms completed by the children's health care providers and submitted upon initial enrollment in 2004.
- Obesity and overweight data for kindergartners and 5th graders were obtained through height and weight surveys conducted in a sample of public schools in East and Central Harlem, North and Central Brooklyn, and the South Bronx in 2005, and in a separate survey of children in grades K through 5 attending public elementary schools citywide in 2003.
- Data on adolescent obesity and lifestyle were obtained from the 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, a self-administered, anonymous questionnaire completed by a representative sample of New York City public high school students.
- Data on adult obesity, overweight, exercise, and eating behaviors were obtained from the 2004 Community Health Survey (CHS). The CHS is a telephone survey administered annually to a representative sample of adults aged 18 and older, representing every neighborhood in New York City.

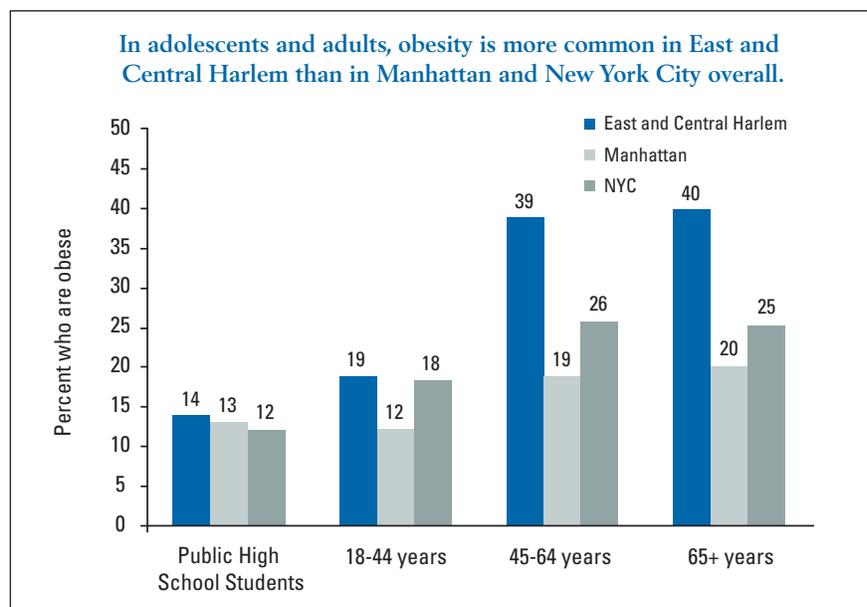
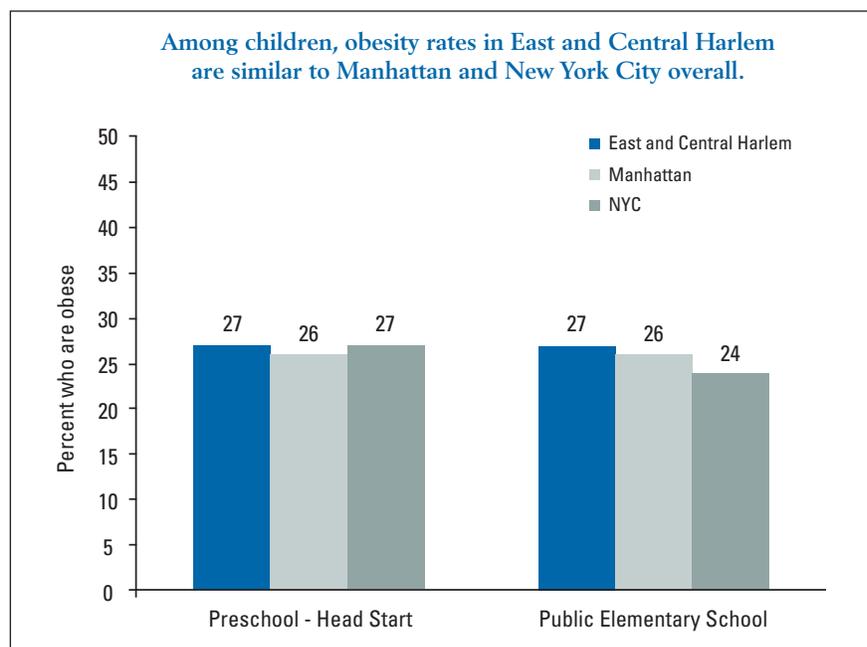
1. Obesity and overweight are common in residents of all ages in East and Central Harlem.

Being overweight or obese is unhealthy at any age. While some consequences of obesity occur only in adulthood, children too, are affected. For instance, children increasingly are developing type 2 diabetes, once diagnosed almost exclusively in adults. Obese children, moreover, are more likely to become obese adults. More than 4 in 10 (42%) Head Start participants in East and Central Harlem are either obese (27%) or overweight (15%). Findings are similar among kindergartners and 5th graders attending public schools: 46% are either obese (27%) or overweight (19%). Nearly 1 in 3 (32%) high school students reports heights and weights that indicate obesity or overweight – 14% are obese, and 18% are overweight. Among adult residents, 6 in 10 (60%) report heights and weights indicating they are obese or overweight – more than 1 in 4 (27%) is obese, and about 1 in 3 (33%) is overweight.



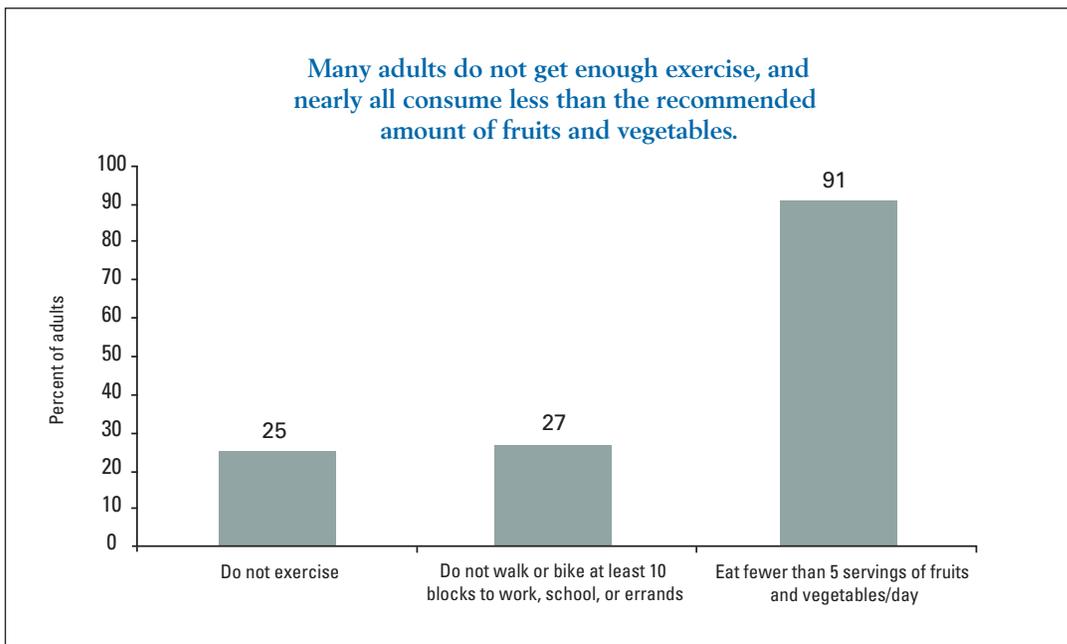
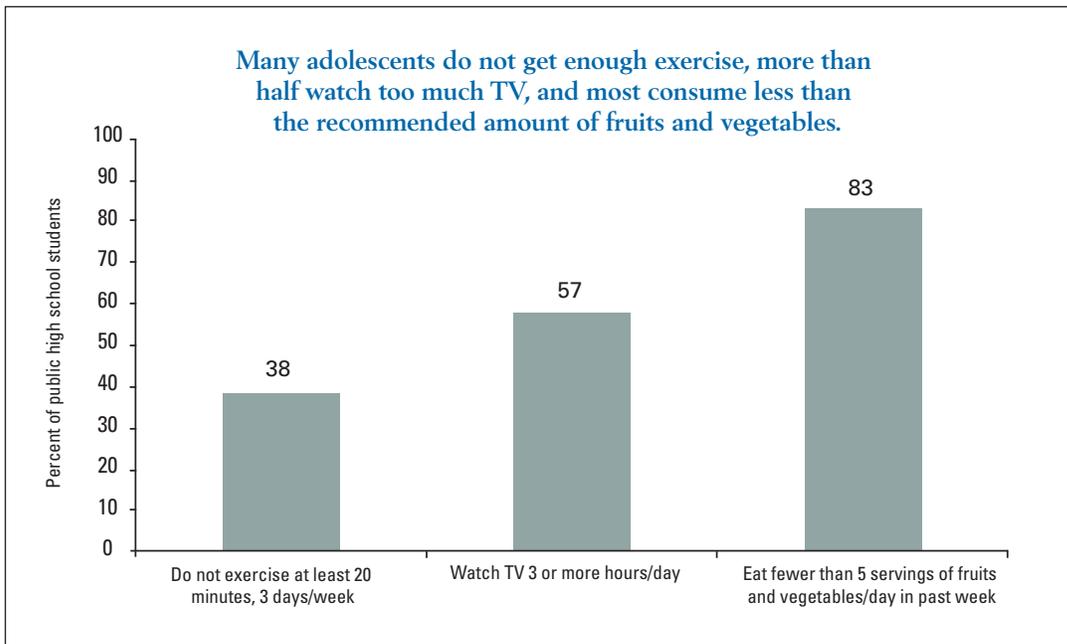
2. The obesity problem in East and Central Harlem is part of an epidemic affecting Manhattan, New York City, and the nation.

The prevalence of obesity among U.S. children has more than tripled since the mid-1960s; two-thirds of U.S. adults are now obese or overweight. This national epidemic has not spared New York City and its neighborhoods. Among children attending Head Start, the prevalence of obesity is similar in East and Central Harlem (27%), Manhattan overall (26%), and the city as a whole (27%). The same is true among public elementary school children, with obesity rates of 27% in East and Central Harlem, 26% in the borough of Manhattan, and 24% in New York City.² Among adolescents and younger adults, the prevalence of obesity is similar in East and Central Harlem and New York City: 14% vs. 12% in high school students and 19% vs. 18% in adults aged 18 to 44. Geographic disparities in obesity prevalence are more pronounced among older adults, with higher rates in East and Central Harlem than in Manhattan as a whole: 39% vs. 19% in persons aged 45 to 64, and 40% vs. 20% in those aged 65 and older.



3. Many adolescents and adults in East and Central Harlem do not exercise regularly or eat the recommended amount of fruits and vegetables.

Weight gain occurs when more calories are consumed than are used through physical activity. Therefore, reaching a healthy weight means balancing food intake and physical activity. Eating sensible portions of nutritious foods and exercising regularly are important components of a healthy lifestyle. In East and Central Harlem, more than 1 in 3 (38%) high school students reports not exercising at least 20 minutes per day, 3 days per week, and nearly 6 in 10 (57%) watch TV at least 3 hours per day. Among adults, 1 in 4 (25%) does not engage in leisure-time exercise, and a similar proportion (27%) reports not walking or biking at least 10 blocks to get to work or school or to run errands. More than 8 in 10 (83%) adolescents and more than 9 in 10 (91%) adults report eating fewer than 5 servings of fruits and vegetables per day.



Addressing the Obesity Epidemic

To tackle the problem of obesity, community residents, employers, city agencies, and community organizations should:

- **Increase opportunities for physical activity.**
 - Make parks and other exercise spaces more accessible, safe, and inviting for all, including families with children and older adults.
 - Create and promote safe walking and biking routes through the neighborhood.
 - Organize exercise sessions at workplaces and public spaces – during lunch hours, before and after work and school, and on weekends.
 - Promote policies and programs that encourage parents and other caregivers to walk children to and from school.
- **Increase the availability of healthy foods and promote healthy eating behaviors.**
 - Launch awareness campaigns around portion size, calories, and weight gain.
 - Encourage local grocers to stock and promote healthy foods such as fresh fruits and vegetables, reduced-fat dairy products, and whole-grain cereals, breads, and pasta.
 - Encourage restaurants to provide healthy menu choices, including foods low in calories and saturated fats, and free of trans fat.
 - Organize nutrition education programs and healthy-cooking classes for families with children, covering such topics as food choices, low-fat cooking methods, and portion control.
 - Organize farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture programs.
 - Encourage consumption of water and other no-sugar-added beverages.
- **Decrease the availability of sugar-sweetened beverages and increase their cost relative to healthier alternatives.**
 - Remove sugar-sweetened beverages from vending machines in schools, workplaces, and other settings.
 - Replace sugar-sweetened beverages with healthier alternatives (e.g., low-fat or skim milk, water) at day-care centers, after-school programs, and other programs serving children.

Endnotes

1. As used in this report, the terms “overweight” and “obese” are equivalent, respectively, to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control terms “at risk for overweight” and “overweight.” U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: BMI - Body Mass Index: BMI for Children and Teens, www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/bmi-for-age.htm

2. The childhood data do not represent all children, especially in high-income neighborhoods, as young children not enrolled in Head Start and children attending private schools were not surveyed.

East and Central Harlem District Public Health Office

New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

May 2007

Resources

Preventing overweight and obesity – healthy eating and physical activity:

- Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2005
www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/document/pdf/dga2005.pdf
- Finding Your Way to a Healthier You
www.health.gov/dietaryguidelines/dga2005/document/pdf/brochure.pdf
- Fruits and Vegetables – Eat 5 to 9 a Day
www.5aday.gov/
- Take Small Steps to Get Healthy
www.smallstep.gov/
- Keeping Your Child Healthy and Ready to Learn
www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/scah/scah-healthy.shtml (or call 311)
- Obesity – What Everyone Should Know
www.nyc.gov/health/obesity (or call 311)
- Physical Activity for Everyone: Are There Special Recommendations for Young People?
www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/recommendations/young.htm
- Global Strategy on Physical Activity
www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/publications/facts/pa/en/

Choosing healthy foods and getting active in East and Central Harlem:

- East and Central Harlem Fitness and Nutrition Resource Guide
www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/cdp/cdp-resource-harlem.pdf (or call 311)

Learning about the health of your neighborhoods:

East Harlem:

www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/data/2006chp-303.pdf (or call 311)

Central Harlem:

www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/data/2006chp-302.pdf (or call 311)

Neighborhood Reports

To help reduce health disparities and improve the health of all New Yorkers, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene established 3 District Public Health Offices (DPHOs) in 2003. These offices target public health efforts and resources to New York City neighborhoods with the highest rates of illness and premature death – East and Central Harlem, the South Bronx, and North and Central Brooklyn.

This neighborhood report was prepared by the Harlem DPHO in collaboration with other DOHMH staff. We hope this report fosters dialogue and collaboration among our many partners: other city agencies, community-based organizations, hospitals and clinics, businesses, elected officials, and most important, the New Yorkers who live and work in East and Central Harlem.

For more information on the District Public Health Offices: nyc.gov/health/dpho