



ELSEVIER

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Perceived not actual overweight is associated with excessive school absenteeism among U.S. adolescents

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KEYWORDS

NHANES;
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Summary

Background: Excess body weight has been reported to be associated with excessive school absenteeism (ESA), but less is known about the association with perceived body weight. The study objective was to weigh the relative influence of perceived and measured weight status on school attendance.

Methods: We used the data from 3113 adolescents age 12–19 years who were interviewed as a part of the National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys (NHANES), 2003–2008. Body weight and height were measured during the physical examination, while self-perceived body weight and the number of school days missed was assessed using questionnaires. Missing one or more days per school month (nine days per school year) was defined as, and indicative of, experiencing ESA.

Results: ESA was reported from 12.31 (SE = 0.89) % of adolescents. The highest prevalence occurred among healthy weight adolescents who erroneously self-perceived as overweight [21.6 (4.77) %], two times higher than adolescents with obesity

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who self-perceived as “just right weight” [10.3 (2.87) %]. The adjusted prevalence ratio (PR) of ESA for healthy weight adolescents who erroneously self-perceived as “overweight” was 1.91 (95%CI=1.10–3.32) compared to healthy weight peers who correctly self-perceived as “just right” (reference group). The PRs were 0.99 (0.48–2.06) and 1.41 (0.86–2.32) respectively for adolescents with obesity who believed that their body weight was “just right” or “overweight”. No significant differences were observed between boys and girls, young (12–15 years) and older adolescents (16–19 years).

Conclusions: Perceived overweight rather than actual overweight is significantly associated ESA among adolescents.

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Introduction

Adolescents often misperceive their own body weight, and the discrepancies between perceived and objectively measured body weight are substantial [1–5] and getting larger [6]. These inaccuracies in self-perception of weight among adolescents impose psychological stress and are associated with an increased likelihood of engaging in risky behaviours such as harmful weight control behaviours [6], cigarette smoking [7,8], and suicide attempt [9]. A recent review concluded that misperceived body weight contributed more to psychological disturbances among adolescents than objectively measured body weight [10].

School absenteeism has been viewed as one of the most disruptive situations in childhood development [11]. Using self-reported body weight and height, Pan et al. observed that adolescents with overweight and obesity had more school days missed than their healthy weight peers [12]. However, obesity was not associated with school absence among adolescents in Philadelphia when weight status was measured directly [13]. And among national samples with measured anthropometrics data, increased body weight was associated with school absence in children, not adolescents [14]. Unlike children, adolescents are especially susceptible to the fluidity of social norms and ideals of physical appearance perpetuated by culture. We hypothesised that, the association between school absenteeism and weight status observed by Pan et al. may be explained by self-perceived body image, and it is body perception not measured body status that is associated with school absenteeism.

The objective of the current study was to weigh the relative influence of perceived and measured weight status on the school attendance.

Methods

Study participants

We analysed the data obtained from three cycles of the National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys (NHANES), 2003–2004, 2005–2006, and 2007–2008. NHANES is a health survey to assess the overall health and nutritional status of the United States population. A total of 4698 adolescents aged 12–19 years completed the body-weight related questionnaire-based interview from 2003 to 2008. We excluded the adolescents not currently enrolled in a school (n=743), who did not provide their “self-perception” of their own body weight (n=204), did not or partially participated in a physical examination to obtain anthropometrics (n=97), or did not answer the question about school days missed in the last 12 months (n=69). The relatively small numbers of underweight adolescents (n=119) or those with biologically unreasonable values of anthropometrics (n=15), or from races/ethnicities other than white, Hispanic, or African American (n=156) precluded robust estimations, and therefore were excluded. After further exclusion of those without family income information (n=182), a total of 1572 boys and 1541 girls were retained for the final analyses.

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