

# National Survey of Children's Health

## Healthy Weight: Foundations in Early Childhood, 2021

Data Brief | April 2023

### ABOUT THE NSCH

The Health Resources and Services Administration's (HRSA) Maternal and Child Health Bureau (MCHB) funds and directs the National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH), the **largest national and state-level survey on the health and health care needs of children 0-17 years**, their families, and their communities.

### HEALTHY WEIGHT TOPICS

The NSCH includes a variety of topics related to healthy weight:

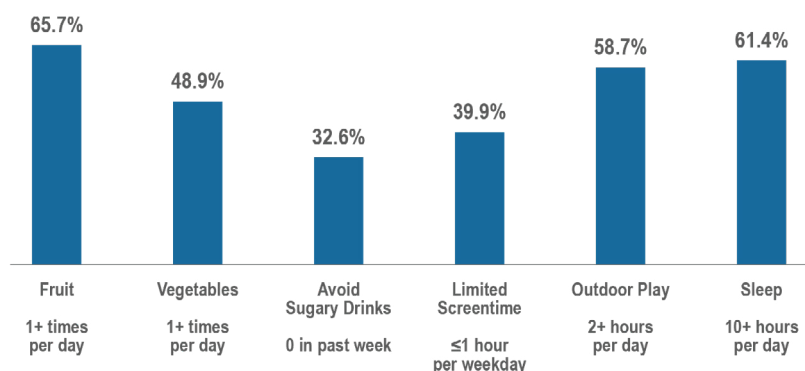
- Weight status and concerns (0-17 years)
- Infant feeding (0-5 years)
- Consumption of fruits & vegetables (1-5 years)
- Consumption of sugary drinks (1-5 years)
- Amount of physical activity (3-17 years)
- Frequency of family meals (0-17 years)
- Amount of screen time (0-17 years)
- Amount of sleep (0-17 years)
- Household food sufficiency (0-17 years)
- Household difficulty covering the basics like food or housing (0-17 years)
- Household receipt of support for food or basic needs (0-17 years)
- Neighborhood amenities for physical activity (0-17 years)
- Eating and weight-related behaviors (6-17 years) will be available in October 2023

Healthy habits established in childhood have lifelong benefits.<sup>1,2</sup> In 2021, with support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity, questions about young children's consumption of fruits, vegetables, and sugary drinks, and the time they spent playing outdoors were added to the NSCH. Together with existing questions about screen time and sleep, this brief presents the prevalence of six healthy weight behaviors among children 3-5 years in the United States (US).

### PREVALENCE OF HEALTHY WEIGHT BEHAVIORS

- In 2021, 2 in 3 (65.7%) preschool-age children ate fruit a least once a day while less than half (48.9%) ate vegetables at least once a day. *The Dietary Guidelines for Americans* recommend eating a variety of fruits and vegetables every day.
- Only 1 in 3 (32.6%) preschool-age children had no sugary drinks in the past week. Sugary drinks (e.g., soda, sports drinks, and fruit drinks that are not 100% juice) are not necessary in the child diet and are not a recommended component of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
- Only 39.9% of preschool-age children had limited screentime of 1 hour or less per weekday. *The American Academy of Pediatrics* recommends limiting screentime to 1 hour per day of high-quality programming for children 2-5 years.
- 58.7% of preschool-age children played outdoors 2 or more hours per day. *The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* recommend that children 3-5 years be physically active throughout the day.
- Similarly, 61.4% of preschool-age children slept 10 hours or more per day. *The American Academy of Sleep Medicine* recommends children 3-5 years sleep 10-13 hours per day (including naps).

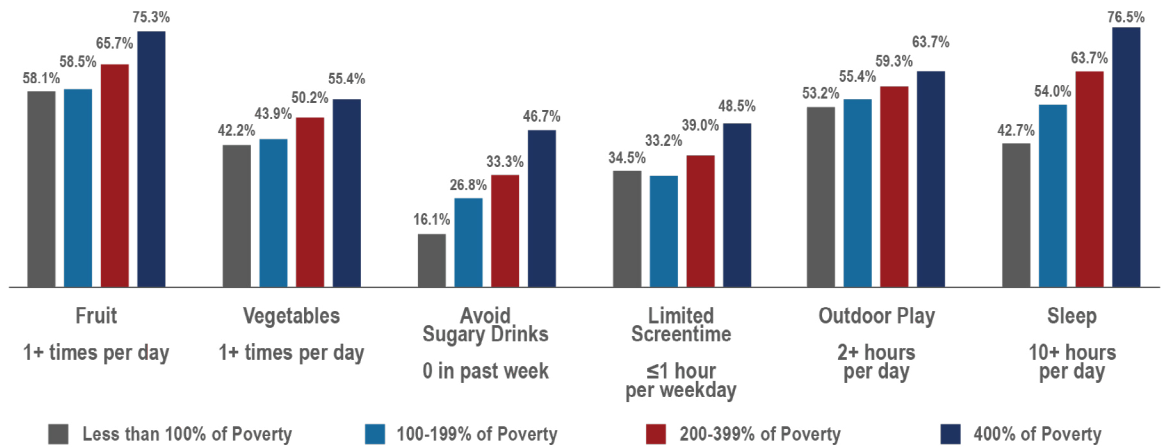
Percent of Children 3-5 Years Engaging in Healthy Weight Behaviors, 2021



# VARIATIONS IN HEALTHY WEIGHT BEHAVIORS BY FAMILY INCOME

- As income increased, the percent of preschool-age children engaging in each healthy behavior increased.
- The largest differences by family income (30+ percentage points) were in the percent of children getting adequate sleep and avoiding sugary beverages. For example, less than half (42.7%) of children in families below poverty averaged 10 hours or more of sleep per day versus 3 out of 4 (76.5%) children with a family income of 400% or more of poverty.
- The smallest difference by family income (10 percentage points) was in the percent of children playing outdoors for 2 or more hours per day, ranging from 53.2% of children in families below poverty to 63.7% of children with a family income of 400% or more of poverty.

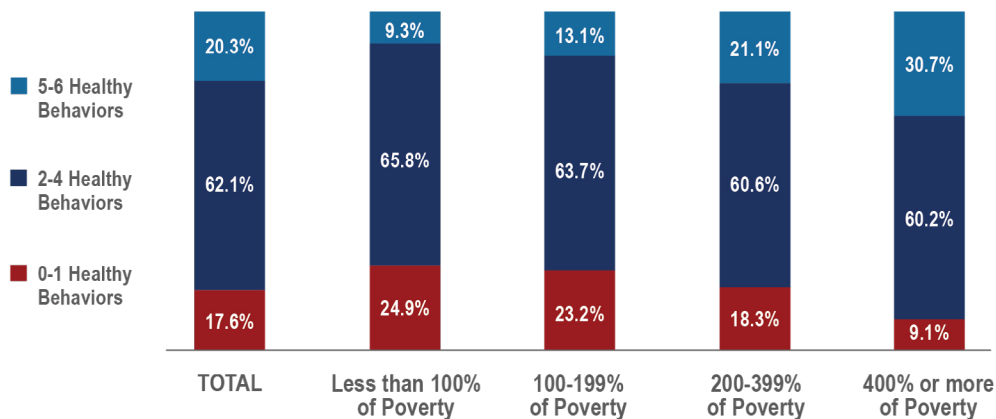
**Percent of Children 3-5 Years Engaging in Healthy Weight Behaviors by Family Income\*, 2021**



\*Ratio of Income to Poverty Thresholds; the U.S. Census Bureau Poverty Threshold for a Family with two children and two adults was \$27,479 in 2021.

- Among all children 3-5 years in the US, 17.6% (2.0 million) engaged in 0 or 1 healthy behavior, 62.1% (7.0 million) engaged in 2 to 4 healthy behaviors, and 20.3% (2.3 million) engaged in 5 or 6 healthy behaviors.
- As family income increased, the number of healthy weight behaviors that children engaged in increased. For example, only 1 in 11 (9.3%) preschool-age children in poverty engaged in 5 or 6 healthy behaviors while 1 in 3 (30.7%) children in families at 400% or more of poverty engaged in 5 or 6 healthy weight behaviors.

**Percent of Children 3-5 Years Engaging in Healthy Weight Behaviors by Family Income\*, 2021**

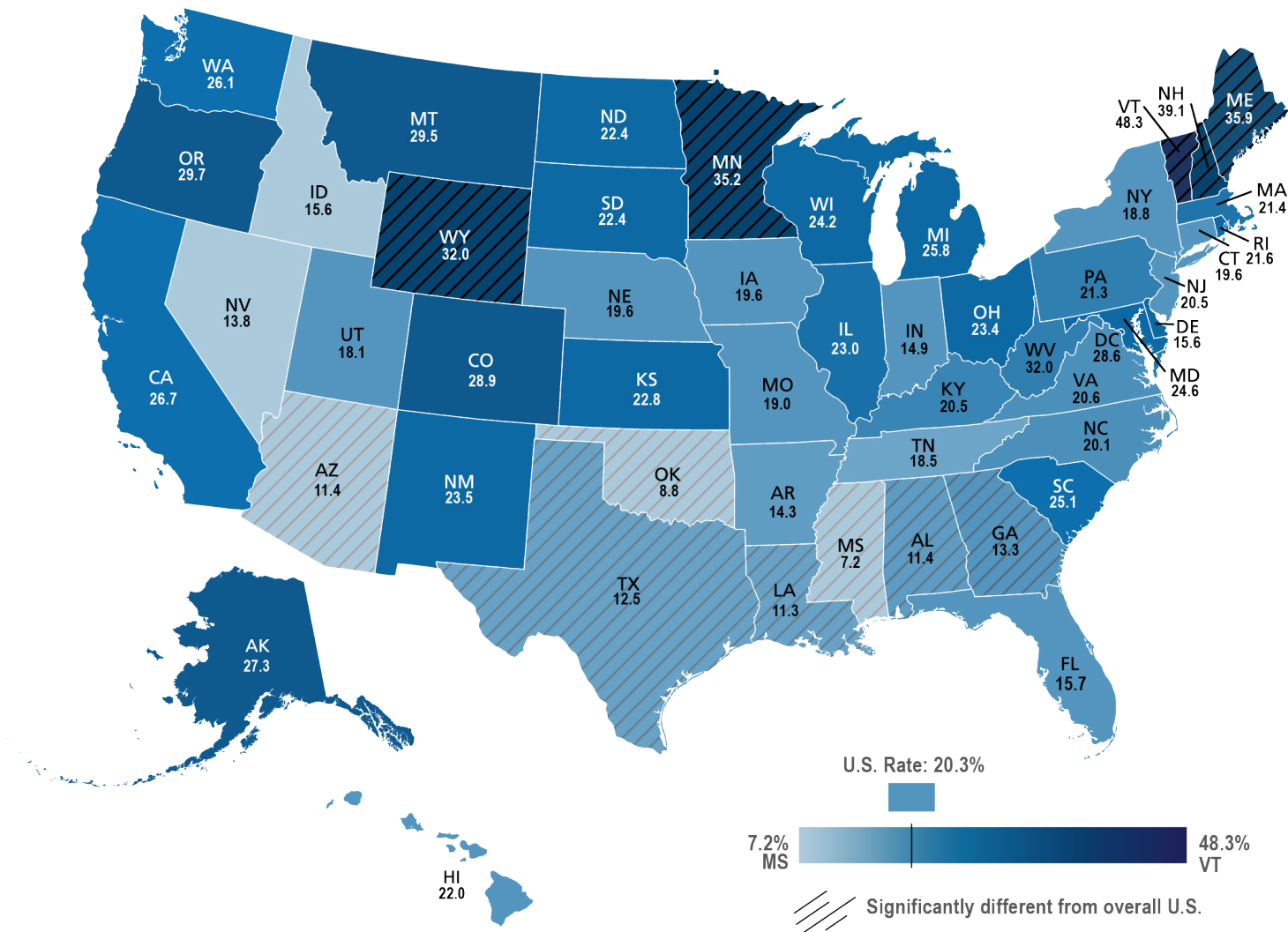


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# STATE VARIATION IN HEALTHY WEIGHT BEHAVIORS

- The percent of preschool-age children engaging in 5 or 6 healthy behaviors varied widely by state, ranging from 7.2% in Mississippi to 48.3% in Vermont.
- Seven states had a significantly lower percent of children 3-5 years engaging in 5 or 6 healthy weight behaviors than in the US overall: Mississippi (7.2%), Oklahoma (8.8%), Louisiana (11.3%), Alabama (11.4%), Arizona (11.4%), Texas (12.5%), and Georgia (13.3%).
- Seven states had a significantly higher percent of children 3-5 years engaging in 5 or 6 healthy weight behaviors than in the U.S. overall: Vermont (48.3%), New Hampshire (39.1%), Maine (35.9%), Minnesota (35.2%), Wyoming (32.0%), Oregon (29.7%), and Colorado (28.9%).

## Percent of Children 3-5 Years Engaging in 5 or 6 Healthy Weight Behaviors, 2021



## DATA NOTE

In 2021, parents completed questionnaires for 12,002 children ages 3-5 years. Estimates presented in this brief are weighted to represent children living in U.S. households and children living in each state. Combining multiple years of data enables more reliable estimates, especially for smaller populations. Survey questions about nutrition and outdoor play were first added to the 2021 NSCH. Therefore, it is not yet possible to combine data from multiple years, conduct comparisons to prior years, or examine trends over time for those questions. For details about NSCH questions for young children (0-5 years), middle-age children (6-11 years), and adolescents (12-17 years), [visit MCHB's NSCH webpage](#).

<sup>1</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [Healthy Weight Nutrition, and Physical Activity](#)

<sup>2</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [Preventing Childhood Obesity: 4 Things Families Can Do](#)