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School Water Fountains to Prevent Obesity

George Ruhe for The New York Times Could this be the answer to childhood obesity? Adding school water fountains, distributing water bottles in classrooms and teaching kids about the health benefits of water can lower a child's risk for becoming overweight, a new study shows.

The findings, [published in today's Pediatrics](#), are based on a unique intervention in 32 German grade schools. In the study, about 3,000 second and third graders were weighed and quizzed about their beverage consumption. In some of the schools, water fountains were added and children were given personal water bottles they could fill at the beginning of the school day. Teachers were also given lesson plans that included health messages about the benefits of water consumption.

At the beginning of the study, there were no statistical differences in the prevalence of overweight kids in the different groups. By the end of the school year, however, children in the schools where water drinking was encouraged were 30 percent less likely to be overweight.

Why the water intervention influenced weight risk among the schoolchildren isn't entirely clear. Overall, the study didn't show statistically meaningful differences in body mass index scores or overall consumption of sugary beverages. However, juice consumption did appear to drop slightly in the water group. Because kids are still growing, the goal is not to help them lose weight but to slow weight gain. The data suggest that the water intervention most likely benefited kids on the borderline of weight problems by preventing them from progressing into the overweight group.

It may be that water consumption slightly reduced the amount of calories kids were consuming from beverages, or it could be that kids who drink extra water eat slightly less food. The study authors noted that the number of students studied was slightly lower than the planned 3,600, which could have undermined their ability to detect an effect. Although water consumption from fountains was measured, overall beverage consumption was determined based on self-reports by students and parents. Small changes in drinking habits are unlikely to be detected using these methods. Another limit is the fact that daily food consumption wasn't measured, so it's not known whether drinking more water influenced a child's eating habits.

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