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Release No.15-05-08

May 8, 2015

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Female children of service members more vulnerable to eating disorders, obesity than civilians

Bethesda, Md (May 8, 2015) – Adolescent female military dependents may be at higher risk than civilians for eating disorders and associated problems, according to a study released today in the online version of the *International Journal of Eating Disorders*. The study, “Comparison of Overweight and Obese Military-Dependent and Civilian Adolescent Girls with Loss-of-Control Eating,” gives insight into the additional vulnerabilities of adolescent female military dependents and shows that they reported more disordered eating and depression than civilians.

Researchers from the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, Fort Belvoir Community Hospital, and National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, led by Marian Tanofsky-Kraff, Ph.D., associate professor of Medical and Clinical Psychology and Director, Developmental Research Laboratory on Eating and Weight Behaviors at USU’s F. Edward Hébert School of Medicine, conducted a study of 23 female overweight adolescent military dependents and 105 age- and BMI-matched civilian peers. All participants completed interview and questionnaire assessments of eating-related and general psychopathology, and metabolic function was measured for all participants.

Military dependents reported more binge eating episodes over the previous three months compared to civilians. Seventeen percent of military dependents met criteria for Binge Eating Disorder as compared to only 2% of civilians. Compared to civilians, military dependents reported more shape, weight, and eating concerns. Military dependents also reported greater depressive symptoms. Also, although preliminary, findings suggested that military dependents may be more likely to have clinically significant insulin resistance than civilians.

“Previous research suggests that military dependents may face additional stressors compared to their civilian peers,” said Natasha Schvey, Ph.D., a post-doctoral fellow in the Department of Medical and Clinical Psychology at USU, and lead author of the study. “The present study suggests that even when girls are matched on known risk factors for obesity and eating disorders, adolescent military dependents may be at greater risk for poor physical and psychological outcomes.”

The authors say that these findings may demonstrate the unique vulnerability of military dependents and highlight a need to assess military dependents for eating-related and general psychopathology.

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