

Ear infection link to adult obesity

By EMILY SHERLOCK

SEVERE ear infections in childhood may alter the sense of taste, making fatty and sweet foods more desirable and increasing the risk of obesity in later life, scientists say.

The link was examined at the American Psychological Association's 116th annual convention in Boston on Thursday, with several scientists presenting findings.

It also surfaced during the week when a report found more than 3.7 million Australians were now obese, costing the nation a staggering \$58 billion.

The Children's Hospital at Westmead has appointed a doctor dedicated to treating overweight children in response to the obesity epidemic.

Linda Bartoshuk, from the University of Florida College of Dentistry, presented preliminary study results to the Boston convention which showed a strong link between taste damage from ear infections and an increased preference for fatty foods.

The study questioned more than

6000 adults about their history of ear infections and those with a moderate to severe history were 62 per cent more likely to be obese.

Another research project, by Brown University, Rhode Island, and the University of Connecticut found women who had impaired taste functioning were more likely to prefer sweet and high-fat foods and be overweight.

Preschoolers with a severe history of ear infections also ate fewer vegetables and tended to be heavier.

Another area of study for scientists was the relationship between obesity and the removal of tonsils. This was a common procedure in the 1960s and 1970s to help tackle recurring ear infections in children.

National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders epidemiologist Howard Hoffman said the effects of tonsillectomies on taste nerves could affect eating habits.

A re-examination of the National Health Examination survey conducted in the 1960s found almost 14,000 children aged six to 17 who

had their tonsils removed were at an increased risk of being overweight.

However, Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute acting director Kirsty Douglas said the increasing availability of high-fat and sugar snacks, teamed with a decline in energy output, could be more of a contributing factor of obesity.

"There is no doubt we have the energy-intake, energy-use balance wrong. There may be other contributing factories to that... but the reality is that the number of high-joule snacks that are now available is much greater than it used to be," she said.

"So I don't think it is just a simple answer of early ear infections, but a very complex issue."

When it came to tackling obesity in Australia, she said more public health measures were needed, including looking at the issue of junk-food advertising targeted at kids. In the ACT, she suggested ensuring good playgrounds so children could have safe areas to play outside.