ARS Research Program on Children's Nutrition—and Obesity Prevention

The Agricultural Research Service conducts one of the most important research programs on children's nutrition—and childhood obesity prevention—in the world. The agency's obesity research program rises from an interlocking tripod of research areas: learning what people eat, what the body needs, and how to modify what we eat to be more beneficial—whether the changes are made while the food is being grown, processed, or eaten. Research from each of these areas influences research in the others.

One focus is relatively new in the history of ARS nutrition research, but it is of particular importance when it comes to preventing obesity in children: studying how and why children make food choices and what intervention strategies can move those choices in directions that will lessen obesity.

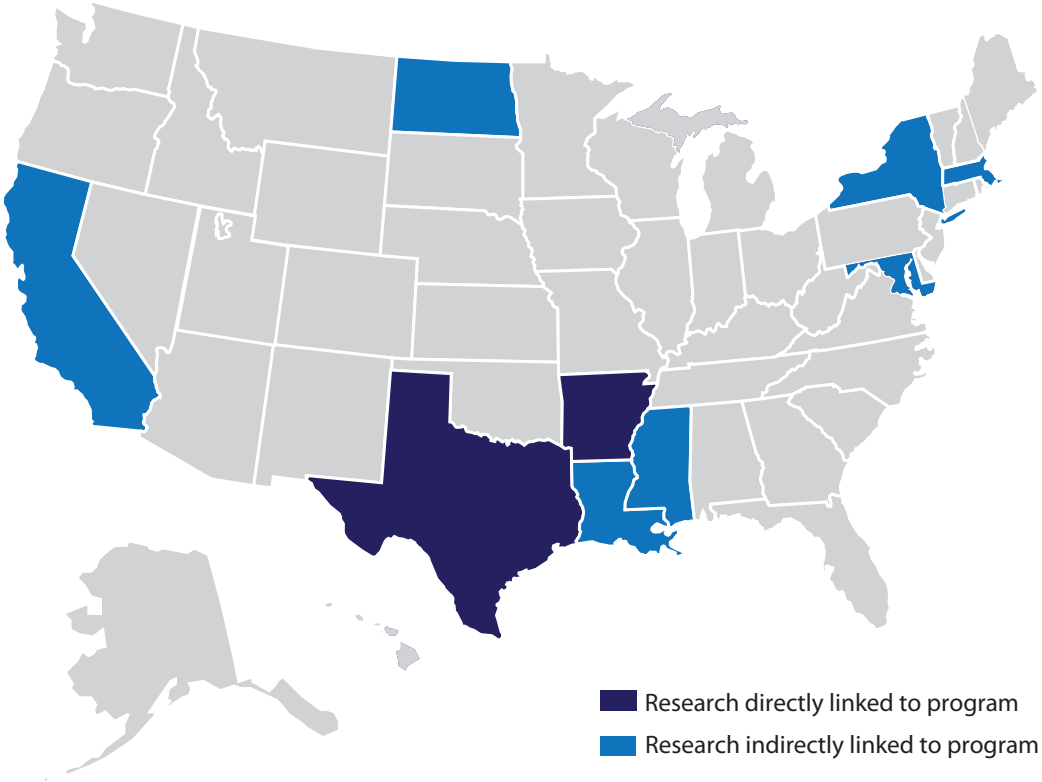
ARS's Obesity Prevention Initiative focuses on determining barriers—as well as motivators—to following the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*. For example, ARS reported the first long-term study of food choices in school. When middle school students had access to foods not in USDA-approved lunch programs, not surprisingly their diets suffered. The finding has contributed to the revamping of school system food policies on the sale of snack foods and soft drinks in schools.

Another priority for the children's nutrition and obesity prevention program is to establish a children's growth standard based on body composition during growth rather than the current standard based only on body weight/height gain.

ARS has two primary locations for children's nutrition research: the Arkansas Children's Nutrition Center in Little Rock and the Children's Nutrition Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas. The Houston center is the largest federally funded children's nutrition research center in the country.

But all of ARS's nutrition research centers play a vital role in increasing

our understanding of what all groups of people, including children, need in an optimum diet.

The need to reduce the growing epidemic of childhood obesity has been recognized as a priority by the White House and the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture. Research that expands our understanding of dietary factors, such as eating habits and nutrition, and lifestyle factors, such as physical activity, is a national priority for ARS. ✷

States Where ARS Does Children's Nutrition and Obesity Prevention Research