

**DECLARATION**

I, Irene Akosua Larbi declare that this research report is my own work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Science in Medicine in the field of Epidemiology and Biostatistics in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at this or any other University.



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Signature of Candidate

20 / OCTOBER / 2008  
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## DEDICATION

## **ABSTRACT**

**Introduction:** Studies have shown that atopy is more prevalent among children living in urban than in rural areas. Factors which determine the development of atopy and the observed rural-urban gradient in its prevalence are not fully understood. In developing countries, the transition from rural to urban areas has been associated with lifestyle changes and an increased prevalence of obesity. Although studies in industrialized countries have identified obesity as a risk factor for asthma, the relationship between obesity and atopy is not clearly established. Moreover, few studies have explored the effect of obesity on allergies in Africa.

**Objectives:** This study sought to determine the prevalence of atopy and body mass index (BMI) percentiles in a population of Ghanaian school children living in rural and urban areas in the Greater Accra Region; and to investigate the association between childhood obesity and atopy.

**Materials and method:** Data on skin prick testing to a panel of aero and food allergens, anthropometric measurements, parasitological and questionnaire data for 1,482 Ghanaian school children aged 6-15 years who participated in the Global View of Food Allergy (GLOFAL) study was analyzed. A cross-sectional analytic design was employed in the study. Atopy was defined as sensitization to at least one allergen whilst the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) growth reference charts were used in defining obesity. Logistic regression was performed to investigate the association of obesity and atopy whilst adjusting for confounding factors.

**Results:** The prevalence of atopy in the study population was 21.5% and was significantly higher in the rural than the urban site (25.1% vs.17.8%). Participants in the urban site were

heavier and taller but a higher mean BMI and prevalence of obesity was observed among the rural participants. No association was observed between obesity and atopy but univariate analysis for urban participants showed significant associations between atopy and male sex [OR: 1.90, 95% CI: 1.30-2.79], age [OR: 1.76, 95% CI: 1.00-3.07], family history of asthma [OR: 1.58, 95% CI: 1.01-2.47] and occupational status of parent [OR: 0.33, 95% CI: 0.12-0.93]. In the rural site, atopy was associated with male sex [OR: 1.49, 95% CI: 1.06-2.08] and co-infection with two or more intestinal parasites [OR: 2.47, 95% CI: 1.01-6.04]. Male sex [OR: 2.10, 95% CI: 1.41-3.42] and age [OR: 1.89, 95% CI: 1.05-3.42] remained the significant predictors of atopy in multivariate analysis for the urban site whilst male sex [OR: 1.45, 95% CI: 1.03-2.04] remained the only significant predictor of atopy in the rural site.

**Conclusion:** This study indicates that obesity is not associated with atopy in a population of Ghanaian school children. However, the burden of obesity and atopy may not be limited to urban areas. It is possible that the burden of these health problems is shifting towards the poor.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DECLARATION.....	.ii
DEDICATION .....	.iii
ABSTRACT.....	.iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	.vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	.vii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	.ix
LIST OF TABLES.....	.x
ACRONYMS.....	.xi
CHAPTER ONE.....	1
INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.0 Background Information.....	1
1.1.0 Rural-urban Gradient in the Prevalence of Allergies.....	3
1.2 Risk Factors for Allergies.....	4
1.2.1 Exposure to Allergens.....	4
1.2.2 Childhood Infections.....	5
1.2.3 Pollution.....	6
1.3 Diet, Obesity and Allergies.....	6
1.4.0 LITERATURE REVIEW.....	10
1.4.1 Association between Obesity and Atopy in Cross-Sectional Studies.....	10
1.4.2 Association between Obesity and Atopy in Case-Control Studies.....	11
1.4.3 Association between Obesity and Atopy in Cohort Studies.....	11
1.5.0 Biological Plausibility of the Association Between Obesity and Atopy.....	11
1.6.0 Confounding Factors.....	12
1.7.0 Measurement of Outcome.....	14
1.8.0 Positive Predictive Value of Skin Prick Testing.....	18
1.9.0 Rationale.....	18
1.9.1 Research question.....	19
1.9.2 Study objectives.....	19
CHAPTER TWO.....	20
METHODOLOGY.....	20
2.0 Introduction.....	20
2.1.0 Study Design.....	20
2.1.1 Selection of Study Sites.....	20
2.2.0 Study Sites.....	21
2.2.1 Accra Metropolitan Area.....	21
2.2.3 Dangme East District.....	22
2.2.3.1 Economic Activities in the Dangme East District.....	22
2.3.0. Study Population.....	23
Inclusion Criteria.....	23
Exclusion Criteria.....	23
2.3.1 Sample Population.....	23
2.3.2 Sample Size.....	24
2.3.3 Study Sample.....	24
2.3.4 Participation Rate.....	24
2.4.0 Measurement.....	26
2.4.1 Skin Prick Testing.....	26

2.4.1.1 Testing Procedure.....	26
2.4.1.2 Diagnosis of a Positive Reaction.....	27
2.4.1.3 Sensitivity of Skin Prick Testing.....	28
2.4.2 Anthropometric Measurements.....	28
2.4.3 Parasitological Survey.....	28
2.4.3.1 Laboratory Analysis of Parasitological Samples.....	28
2.4.4 Questionnaire Survey.....	29
2.5.0 Data management and Analysis.....	30
2.5.1 Data Editing.....	30
2.5.2 Definition of Atopy (outcome variable).....	32
2.5.3 Definition of Childhood Obesity (exposure variable).....	32
2.5.4 Categorization of Confounding Variables.....	32
2.5.5 Descriptive Statistics.....	33
2.5.6 Model Building.....	33
2.5.7 Finale Model.....	34
2.6.0 Ethical Consideration.....	34
CHAPTER THREE.....	35
RESULTS.....	35
3.0 Introduction.....	35
3.1.0 Description of the Study Population.....	35
3.2.0 Home Environment Characteristics of Study Population.....	37
3.3.0 Distribution of BMI in the Study Population.....	40
3.4.0 Prevalence of Obesity.....	41
3.4.1 Factors Associated with Obesity.....	41
3.5.1 Prevalence of Atopy.....	43
3.6.0 Factors Associated with Atopy.....	44
3.7.0 Effect of missing observations.....	47
CHAPTER FOUR.....	48
DISCUSSION.....	48
Conclusion.....	53
Recommendations.....	54
APPENDIX A.....	55
APPENDIX B.....	56
APPENDIX C.....	60
APPENDIX D.....	64
APPENDIX E.....	66
APPENDIX F.....	68
APPENDIX G.....	69
References.....	71

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure</b>	<b>Page</b>
1.1: Major hormones and cytokines secreted by adipocytes and their functions in the immune system.....	13
2.1: Recruited schools and their relative contribution to the sample size.....	25
2.2: Varying participation rates and final sample size used in analysis.....	31
3.1: Distribution of age-standardized BMI in females aged 6-15 years.....	40
3.2: Distribution of age-standardized BMI in females aged 6-15 years.....	40
3.3: Sensitization of urban and rural participants to different allergens.....	42
A1: Map of Greater Accra Region showing recruited schools in urban and rural sites.....	55
D1: Ethics clearance certificate for the original study.....	64
D2: Ethics clearance certificate for secondary data analysis.....	65



## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1.1: Prevalence of obesity in the administrative regions in Ghana.....	8
1.2: Prevalence of age-standardized estimates for obesity in some African countries.....	9
1.3: Allergens and diagnostic criteria for atopy.....	15
3.1: Distribution of height, weight and BMI in school children aged 6-15 years in urban and rural areas in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana.....	36
3.2: Demographic characteristics of 1,482 school children aged 6-15 years in urban and rural areas of the Greater Accra Region.....	37
3.3: Home environment characteristics of 1,482 school children aged 6-15 years in the urban and rural study sites in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana.....	38
3.4: Prevalence of obesity in 1,482 school children aged 6-15 years in urban and rural areas in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana.....	41
3.5: Prevalence of atopy in 1,482 school children aged 6-15 years in urban and rural areas in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana.....	43
3.6: Factors associated with atopy in univariate and multivariate analysis among children aged 6-15 years living urban and rural areas in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana.....	45
B1: Skin Prick Testing Record Sheet A.....	56
B2: Skin Prick Testing Record Sheet B.....	57
B3: Skin Prick Testing Record Sheet C.....	58
B4: Skin Prick Testing Record Sheet D.....	59
E1: E1: Factors associated with obesity in univariate and multivariate analysis in school children aged 6-15 years in rural and urban areas in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana.....	66
F1: Frequency of dietary intake among school children aged 6-15 years in rural and urban areas in the Greater Accra Region.....	68
G1: Factors associated with atopy in univariate analysis in children aged 6-15 years in urban and rural areas in the Greater Accra Region of Ghana.....	69

## ACRONYMS

BMI: Body Mass Index

CDC: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

CI: 95 % Confidence Interval

EIB: Exercise-Induced Bronchospasm

GLOFAL: Global View of Food Allergy

HIV: Human Immunodeficiency Virus

IgE: Immunoglobulin E

IL: Interleukin

ISAAC: International Study of Asthma and Allergies in Childhood

LPG: Liquefied Petroleum Gas

NHANES: National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey

OR: Odds Ratio

PUFA: Polyunsaturated Fatty Acids

SPT: Skin Prick Testing

Th2: T- helper lymphocyte type 2

TNF $\alpha$ : Tumor Necrosis Factor  $\alpha$

TX: Texas

US: United States

USA: United States of America