

*Health/Science*

**DISCOVERIES....**

**Heating Program Might Have Nutritional Benefits**

*By Joyce Pellino, Globe Staff*

Young children in low-income families that received government subsidies to pay winter heating bills showed fewer signs of undernourishment, according to a study led by researchers at the Boston University School of Medicine. The study evaluated 7,000 children under age 3 who were treated in clinics and emergency rooms in five cities, including Boston, between 1998 and 2004. Children in eligible families not receiving financial assistance from the Federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program were significantly more likely to be underweight for their age than children in families participating in the program. And children seen in ERs in Boston and Little Rock were more likely to be hospitalized that day if their families were not getting heat assistance. Deborah Frank, a BU Pediatrics Professor, said the 30 percent higher admission rate amount the children “stunned” researchers. The study, conducted by members of the Children’s Sentinel Nutrition Assessment Project, a privately funded national group of clinicians and public health specialists, suggests a cold toddler might need to use more calories to generate heat than for growth. Also, families may cut food purchases if they spend more on heat.

**BOTTOM LINE:** Physicians should encourage poor families with young children to apply for the energy assistance program, and increasing the percentage of participating families with young children might benefit their growth and health.

**CAUTION:** The study did not show that receiving heating assistance caused nutritional improvements, and unknown factors could explain the results. Also, the families in the study are not a representative sample so the findings cannot be extrapolated to a broader population.

**WHERE TO FIND IT:** *Pediatrics, November*