

Childhood obesity — a preventable epidemic

When most of today's parents were kids, there were no computers, no video games, no cable TV, and few fast food restaurants. Back then, most kids spent their days riding bikes, climbing trees, and playing tag. The family got together at dinnertime, sat at the kitchen table, and ate a home-cooked meal. Until recently, only 5 to 10 percent of America's children were overweight.

Today, more than twice as many kids are overweight. That adds up to about one in four — or 10 million — children who are heavier than their ideal weight. There isn't a racial, ethnic, or age group that escapes this mind-boggling fact, and boys and girls are both affected. Obesity is thus the most prevalent nutritional disease of children and adolescents in the United States. Eighty percent of overweight ten- to thirteen-year-olds will become overweight adults. The more overweight a child is, the higher his or

her risk for adult obesity and type II diabetes.

The dramatic medical and emotional problems that develop when a child is overweight will follow them through their teenage years and into adulthood. If you choose not to make changes while a child is still young, chances are they will suffer from several conditions — including low self-esteem, depression, isolation, asthma, diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, abnormal bone development, and sleep apnea.

What's more, the damage resulting from an overweight childhood is usually damage done; that is, it's typically irreversible, creating a lifetime of emotional and physical obstacles for your child. And that lifetime, statistically speaking, will end sooner rather than later.

Children who are overweight or obese are three to five times more likely to suffer a heart

attack or stroke before they reach the age of 65. That is a statement that would frighten any parent who believes his or her child is overweight. The scary part is that the statement is true.

The percentage of U.S. children who are overweight has tripled since 1980, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. There are diseases previously seen only in adults being diagnosed in "hefty" children who are likely to also be overweight or obese as adults. Hopefully, making a connection between obesity and heart problems will open the eyes of parents to see that something needs to be done to help their children.

High calorie diets, little or no exercise, television, and computers are all contributing factors. The habits that children develop now could very well lead to health problems well into their adult lives. Also, our schools play a very big role in this issue.

Nutrition in the school system needs to be reevaluated. In many schools today, children are fed meals that they like and appeal to the eye ... but do those meals have any nutritional value? Are the soda and snacks sold through vending machines good for them? The answer is a resounding NO!

Overweight and/or obese children cost U.S. schools millions of dollars every year in lost funding, and may be lowering test scores. Physical activity during school has decreased, while low nutritional value foods served at school lunches and the number of vending machines has increased. We need to urge our school systems, and all parents, to promote more physical activity and better nutrition. "Schools have the unique opportunity, even the responsibility, to teach and model healthful eating and physical activity, both in theory and in practice," says Dr. David Satcher, a former U.S. surgeon general who helped found a nonprofit group called Action for Healthy Kids. Action for Healthy Kids reviewed several studies regarding childhood obesity and children who are overweight to find evidence linking overweight children to poor grades. Here are a few examples of their findings:

- Schools with high percentages of students who did not regularly exercise or eat well had smaller gains in test scores than did other schools.
- Children who do not get the recommended basic vitamins and minerals have lower test scores, are absent more, have difficulty concentrating, and have less energy.
- Physical activity programs are linked to increased concentration and improved math, reading, and writing test scores.
- Students taking daily physical education classes missed fewer classes, had a more positive attitude toward school, and earned better grades.

Not only do overweight chil-

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dren risk early heart disease, diabetes and cancer, but their learning can be affected as well. One study found that severely overweight students miss, on average, one day per month or nine days per year, and that absentee rates among these students are six times higher than their non-overweight peers.

Is My Child Overweight?

A child's pediatrician or family physician can determine how overweight a child is, and his or her risk of becoming an overweight adult. Plotting the child's weight and height on the US Centers for Disease Control Body Mass Index (BMI) growth charts helps the doctor determine what percentile best describes your child in relation to others in the same age group.

What To Do

After determining the BMI level of your child, a parent can take the following action steps. First, begin to educate yourself in the field of Childhood Obesity. Second, there are programs administered by professionals to help. A program I have administered in public school that has worked very well is TrimKids™. A book by the same name is a must-read for parents of an overweight child. "Do something!" is my attitude about this very important issue. Take action that pediatricians are not equipped to take. It all begins with better educated parents making more informed decisions about the nutrition, fitness, and esteem building of their overweight child.

I will conclude my article this week with the following: child-

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hood is difficult when you do not fit in, or have qualities that may not be "mainstream." Being one of those children growing up, I can relate to some of the emotions that overweight children experience. And I know that the parents also suffer ... from worry, from guilt, and from not knowing what to do to help. Please understand that with the parents there to guide them, the battle CAN be won...with knowledge, with encouragement, and with love.

Anything I can do to help...just ask.

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