



For a Healthy Future

A balanced lifestyle is the key to preventing childhood obesity

CHILDHOOD OBESITY IS A growing epidemic in today's society. With the convenience of fast food restaurants and our high-tech generation, children are lacking a balanced lifestyle of healthy food and activity. According to a 2002 National Institutes of Health statistic, one in every five children is overweight, and the number of children who are considered overweight has doubled in the last few decades.

Children who are obese are more likely to be obese in adulthood and run a higher risk of having health problems in the future. Children who are severely overweight may also suffer from psychological problems and low self-esteem as a result of direct, intentional, and hurtful weight-related teasing.

What are the causes?

There are many causes that are thought to be contributing factors to childhood

obesity. The first possible cause is genetics. When both parents are obese, the child has a more likely chance of becoming obese. Socio-economic factors also play a role in overweight children. Low-income families have a more difficult time providing healthy options for meals and have less access to recreational facilities.

Although we do not necessarily have control over genetics or socio-economic factors, there are a few causes of obesity

that we can control. With the huge advancements in technology in the past decade, children have electronic entertainment at their fingertips. From television to video games and the computer, children are able to entertain themselves for hours by sitting in one spot. This becomes a problem when children could be outside doing physical activity rather than sitting in front of the computer. Almost half of all children ages 8-16 years watch three to five hours of television a day (National Institutes of Health 2002 statistic).

Another cause of childhood obesity that is important to consider is eating habits. In today's society, there are many non-healthy foods readily available. Parents are sometimes unaware of how much soda and junk food their children eat. Some schools even offer unhealthy options for lunch such as french fries, hamburgers, chips and soda. On television, children are overexposed to advertising that promotes snacks and treats that are high in fat, sugar, and calories.

What are the health risks?

Because of the growing problem of childhood obesity, it is important to know about the health risks involved if your child is overweight. Obese children have a significant increase in risk for many different health problems. Over the past twenty years, children and adolescents have shown an increase in the occurrence of Type 2 Diabetes. They have also found that obese children have high blood pressure and cholesterol, which can be risk factors for heart disease. Another major problem that can occur in overweight children is sleep apnea. Sleep apnea happens when breathing is interrupted while sleeping, and children who have it wake up in the morning still feeling exhausted.

Besides the physical health risks, there

For More Information

If you would like more information on childhood obesity, go to these Web sites:

- **Center for Disease Control and Prevention**
www.cdc.gov
- **National Institutes of Health**
www.nih.gov
- **American Obesity Association**
www.obesity.org

are mental health risks involved as well. Growing up as an adolescent is not easy in the first place. Adding a weight problem can cause more humiliation and embarrassment to the trials of being a young person. Overweight children are sometimes teased and made fun of by other classmates in school. This can cause emotional distress, depression, and have long-term effects. Overall, the physical and mental health risks involved with being obese are very severe and should be taken seriously.

What can you do?

The first and most important thing you can do as a parent is be loving and supportive of your overweight child. The following list gives some guidelines on how to create a healthy living environment for overweight children.

- Be supportive and accepting of your child. Children know if they are overweight and don't need additional reminding. They especially don't want to be singled out.
- Set guidelines for how much time is allowed for your children to watch television, play video games, or use the computer.
- Encourage kids to get involved in some sort of physical activity. Plan family activities that involve some type of physical exercise such as

biking, walking, raking leaves, or washing the car. Start small and don't push them into a sport or activity they would not do well in due to their weight.

- Use food as fuel, not as a reward for good behavior. If food is used as a reward, children learn that food is a crutch or associated with good behavior. This allows children to think of food as something comfortable they might always want. Try to get them to cut down on snacks between meals.
- Eat meals together as a family rather than in front of the television. Also, involve your children in meal planning and grocery shopping. This allows your children to learn and have a part in the decision making for meals.
- Have healthy snack foods available so children don't automatically reach for the chips or a candy bar. Healthy options include fresh or canned fruit, frozen yogurt, vegetables, baked chips, graham crackers or other low in fat and calorie options.
- Set an example for your children. If you as parents lead a healthy lifestyle of physical activity and healthy eating habits, your children are more likely to follow in your footsteps.
- Don't be afraid to seek medical help. There are major health risks involved with childhood obesity and it is important to involve your pediatrician in a program to help your child.

Childhood obesity is easier to prevent than to treat, and the key to prevention is parent education. Seek medical advice, provide your children with proper nutrition and low-fat snacks, promote good exercise/activity habits, and monitor television viewing and computer use. ♦