

## **Overweight Children: An Epidemic?**

By Joan Bangen

It's not "cool" to be fat, but that has not prevented an obesity epidemic from occurring among American children. Childhood obesity increased from 5 percent in 1964 to about 13 percent in 1994. Today, it is about 20 percent -- and rising.

Today, 10% of 2- to 5-year-olds and more than 15% of children between the ages of 6 and 19 are overweight. And a whopping 31% of adults are also obese. Studies indicate that overweight and obese adolescents have up to an 80% chance of becoming overweight and obese adults, especially if one or more parent has the same condition.

### **How Do You Know If A Child Is Overweight Or Obese?**

Many parents and providers worry about whether or not their kids are at an unhealthy weight. Although you may think that the child is overweight or even obese, only a doctor should make that determination. They usually do this by calculating the child's body mass index, or BMI. To determine BMI, the doctor divides the child's weight by his or her height squared, or  $wt/ht^2$  - multiplying the result by the conversion factor of 703 if using pounds and inches. This calculation helps the doctor determine whether the child's weight is appropriate for height.

Children ranking higher than the 97th percentile for age are considered obese. Kids with a BMI score between the 85th and 97th percentile are considered overweight or at risk for becoming obese (or extremely overweight). And children who fall between the 5th and 85th percentile are considered normal weight.

The National Academy of Sciences, Institute of Medicine recommends that Doctors should routinely measure every child's body mass index (BMI).

### **What Are The Risks of Overweight Children?**

Obesity is a serious problem, and can contribute to sleep apnea and asthma in children. Overweight and obese children are at risk for serious health conditions like type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol - all once considered exclusively adult issues.

70% of children will retain obesity into adulthood at which time they will have a higher risk of developing a number of medical conditions, such as heart disease, arthritis, and certain types of cancer. Preventing or treating obesity in children may reduce the risk of developing these conditions as they get older.

Overweight children are also prone to low self-esteem that stems from being teased, bullied, or rejected by peers. Overweight children are often the last to be chosen as playmates, even as early as preschool.

They may also be more likely than average-weight children to develop unhealthy dieting habits and eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia, and they may be more prone to depression, as well as substance abuse.

### **What Causes Overweight/Obesity?**

There are a number of factors that can cause overweight or obesity, either alone or together. If someone becomes overweight or obese, genetic factors, lifestyle habits, or both may be involved.

Today's busy families have fewer free moments to prepare wholesome, home-cooked meals, day in and day out. Much of what we eat is quick and easy - from fat-laden fast food to microwave and prepackaged meals. Daily schedules are so jam-packed that there's little time to prepare healthier meals or to squeeze in some exercise. Portion sizes, in the home and out, have drastically increased.

Plus, now, more than ever, life is sedentary - children spend more time playing with electronic devices, from computers to home video game systems, than actively playing outside. Television is a major culprit.

### **What Can You Do To Help?**

If a child is moderately overweight, there should be no talk of dieting at this age. Instead, the emphasis will be on lowering the rate of weight gain as the child grows taller. You can help stall a child's weight gain by changing eating habits, lowering fat intake, and increasing the level of physical activity.

When children are spending most of their free time sitting in front of televisions and computers, they are not outside running, jumping or engaging in physical activity that would keep their weight down. Parents and providers need to set limits on the time their children are engaged in passive activities.

Don't punish or scold the child - use positive reinforcement. Make physical activity fun and rewarding, and involve the entire family or early childhood program. When everyone participates the child will not feel singled out or punished for being overweight. They will learn from example, healthy eating and physical activity will be more fun, and everyone will benefit.

### **Important things you can do to curtail the obesity epidemic among children:**

- **Limit TV viewing and time on the computer** to one to two hours per day.
- **Encourage participation in physical activity** and sports. Children should get at least 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily.
- **Use physical activities as a reward** instead of food.

- **Have regularly scheduled planned mealtimes together.** At least one meal should be eaten together every day and try to designate one night a week as family night.
- **Provide nutritious, well-balanced, low-calorie, and low-fat meals.** Curtail visits to fast-food restaurants.
- **Limit the availability of high-fat and high-sugar snacks** in your home/program.
- **Eat only in designated areas of the house**, for example, the kitchen or dining room. Avoid eating in front of the computer or television.
- **BE A ROLE MODEL!**

Numerous resources are available on this topic. Contact your Child Care Health Consultant, Pediatrician, local Public Health Department, Dieticians and others.

The Wyoming Action for Healthy Kids distributes a poster to raise awareness of this issue. Contact Judy Barbe, [jbarbe@wdairycouncil.com](mailto:jbarbe@wdairycouncil.com), for more information.

Also utilize the internet (to search type in childhood obesity). Excellent information can be found on the HRSA, CDC, or American Dietetic Association websites.

*Contact Healthy Child Care Wyoming for additional resources.*

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