

Childhood Obesity and the Aware Parent

By Claudia Anrig, D.C.

Whether you're dropping your child off at school, walking through the amusement park or mall, or just wandering down the aisle at the local grocery store, you can't help but notice the rise in childhood obesity. What was once rarely seen in children twenty or thirty years ago has become common in this country and others around the world.

Childhood obesity is a serious topic with troubling statistics, but the overwhelming evidence is, our children are weighing too much. This article is meant to share this information with you, but also make positive recommendations that any busy family can implement in a 30/60-day plan.

A Global Epidemic

The World Health Organization considers obesity to be one of the most common nutritional disorders in developed countries and one of the most common chronic illnesses in the Western World. With more than a 400% increase in obese children since 1982 and with up to 33% of all children significantly overweight this has become a major concern.

A new study suggests that one in just four overweight children are already showing early signs of type II diabetes and 60% of obese children already have at least one risk factor for heart disease.¹

It's no longer just a matter of feeling healthier and looking better, it's now a case of living longer.

The impact of obesity on a child's health is alarming. Several studies have linked childhood obesity to the following serious illnesses:

- Cardiovascular disease,
- Sleep apnea,
- Asthma,
- Insulin resistance,
- Diabetes,
- Menstrual irregularities
- Mental health disorders (depression and low self-esteem)

Yet, even worse, is the tendency of childhood obesity to continue into adulthood. A recent study found that 77% of children with a body mass index greater than the 95th percentile remained obese as adults.²

Obesity Origins

While childhood obesity cannot be attributed to any one particular influence, studies have shown that there are several modifiable factors:

- Physical activity – a lack of regular exercise, exacerbated by decreased PE and recess time becoming a problem in parts of the US and Canada
- Sedentary behavior – spending the majority of time watching TV, surfing the web and playing video games
- Eating habits – over-consumption of high-calorie foods as well as unhealthy eating patterns such as: eating when not hungry, eating while watching TV or doing homework

- Environment – over-exposure to advertisements that promote high-calorie foods and a lack of opportunity for physical activity such as: parents not home from work until after dark, eliminating the opportunity for the child to run and play outside

These factors are all easily modified when the parent recognizes how influential they are in these areas both directly and indirectly. For example, a parent has direct influence by providing an environment that nurtures physical activity in the child and has indirect influence through modeling physical activities.

Studies have shown that children 4 to 7 years of age whose parents were physically active are six times more likely to be active than children in the same age group whose parents are inactive.³

Plainly, the obese child will typically have the following lifestyle:

- Busy parents with little or no time for outside activities
- Children allowed to watch TV or play video games for more than 1 hour a day
- Decreased physical activity at school
- Fast foods and processed foods are part of a weekly diet

If you recognize your family in any of the above, a success principle to apply is: if the child is not active, find a physical activity to do alongside the child.

The Chiropractic Factor

Your family wellness Chiropractor is dedicated to introducing you to a wellness model and as such can provide you with recommendations and encouragement for lasting change.

Several changes that can facilitate a healthier family and avoid the problem of childhood obesity are the following:

- Pick an aerobic physical activity like bicycling, tennis, soccer, etc., something that your entire family will enjoy, and make it a weekly outing then increase it to two times a week.
- If you pick up your children from school, take a few minutes each day and walk a few laps around the school track before coming home.
- If you are a working parent that utilizes the gym for your weekly activity, check to see if they will allow your 12-year-old (or older) to use the treadmill.
- Offer an award system for physical activity to the sedentary child, allow the child ten-minutes of recreation (TV, video games, etc.) for every ten minutes spent exercising, running or playing outdoors.

Whatever physical activity you choose, pick one that is for the entire family. Sometimes, if one child is very active and participates in school sports or little league, the family may consider the time at the game as family/activity time. This can be detrimental for the inactive or sedentary child since they are sitting the entire time and usually consuming unhealthy food items such as soda, popcorn and corn dogs.

When making choices to help your child remember this one valuable point: you don't see obese children with a diet of fresh vegetables, fruit and healthy protein sources.

Creating a healthy eating environment:

- Implement the same health diet (rich in fruits, vegetables and healthy protein) for the entire family not just one individual.
- Plan times when you prepare foods together. Children enjoy participating and can learn about healthy cooking and food preparation.

- Eat meals together at the dinner table at regular times.
- Avoid rushing to finish meals. Eating too quickly does not allow enough time to digest and to feel a sense of fullness.
- Avoid other activities during mealtimes such as watching TV or reading.
- Have snack foods available that are low-calorie and nutritious. Fruits, vegetables and raw nuts (i.e. almonds, cashews, etc.) are good examples.
- Avoid serving portions that are too large.
- Avoid forcing your child to eat if he or she is not hungry but do not give in later with snack foods.
- Limit fast food eating to no more than once every two weeks.
- Avoid using food as a reward or the lack of food as punishment.

Recommended Websites for Healthier Eating

<http://www.wholefoodsmarket.com/recipes/kids/index.html>

<http://1stholistic.com/Recipes/dir-food-diet-articles.htm>

<http://www.mothering.com/sections/recipes/recipes.html>

http://www.n101.com/HealthNotes/HNs/Healthy_Eating/Guide.htm

¹ <http://www.winltdusa.com/about/infocenter/healthnews/articles/obesestats.htm>

² Freedman, D.S., Khan, L.K., Dietz, W.H., Srinivasan, S.R., & Berenson, G.S. (2001). Relationship of childhood obesity to coronary heart disease risk factors in adulthood: The Bogalusa Heart Study. *Pediatrics* 108 (3), 712-718

³ Perusse, L., Tremblay, A., Leblanc, C., & Bouchard, C. (1989). Genetic and environmental influences on level of habitual physical activity and exercise participation. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 125 (5), 1012-1022

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