

## Overweight Kids: Cause for Concern but a Trend You Can Turn

*By Tamar Nordenberg and Donna Engelgau*

Is your child overweight?

In a study by Bassett Healthcare Research Institute in Cooperstown, N.Y., only 28 percent of parents whose children were by definition obese saw them as being overweight at all.

Even if you don't see your child as being too fat, it might be better to take the word of a doctor or dietitian. The fact is: one in five American children is overweight.

Indeed, an epidemic of obesity has been declared in the United States, and with that an increase in obesity in kids, says Andrea Pennington, M.D., a pediatrician based in Silver Spring, Md.

"We have noticed that children in America are tending more toward obesity than in decades past," Pennington says. "Part of it is due to sedentary lifestyles that kids are getting into. Rather than run in the woods, they've got Game Boy, Nintendo and television."

In fact, studies have shown that children more obese than their peers engage in more sedentary activities. But diet plays a huge role in this epidemic, too.

"Because more of our parents are in the workforce, they have less time to prepare nutrition meals," says Pennington. "That means more kids are getting nutrition out of a box. They're eating more prepackaged foods, along with fast foods. Many of these choices are heavier in fats and sugars and unfortunately appeal to children's palates."

Adding to this, children often receive bigger meals than they need, says Pennington, and the biggest parts are typically the fattest.

### **What's the Big Concern?**

You might be saying to yourself that overweight children have fewer weight-related problems than their adult counterparts, so why worry?

According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), a chubby child is likely to grow into an overweight adult, with an increased risk for health problems such as heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke and some forms of cancer.

Because of these conditions that can develop years down the road, parents need to treat obesity as a potentially serious eating disorder, says Dana Kiesel, Ph.D., who treats obesity and other eating-related conditions in her Beverly Hills psychology practice.

"Kids want what they see, and they're seeing restaurant portions that have gotten bigger and commercials that are pushing unhealthy products full of sugar," she says. "Like adults, some of these kids don't self-regulate what they eat."

### **Children See, Children Do**

As in many matters, small-fries often follow in father and mother's footsteps where body size is concerned. For one thing, when parents super-size their McDonald's meal, watchful children learn to do the same. And the kids of couch potatoes tend likewise to sit sedentary on the sofa.

Genetics is another factor that predisposes kids to follow in their plump parents' form, according to the NIH. But with attention to healthful eating and exercise, kids aren't more likely to follow healthy lifestyles and attain a healthful weight.

While teaching your children good nutrition, experts say to make sure, first and foremost, to buttress their self-esteem by assuring them you'll accept them large or small.

In teaching her two daughters healthy habits while she herself dieted toward her ideal weight, psychiatrist and FDA drug reviewer Kelly (not her real name) was careful not to send misguided messages to the kids. "They're girls and I don't want to destroy their self-image so I never say 'I'm fat' or 'I'm trying to be thinner.' Instead I have said things like 'I've decided we need to eat more healthy foods' and 'I'm taking a healthy eating class at work and the healthy

eating teacher says we should get exercise and shouldn't drink as much juice."

### **Model Your Behavior**

The trick, experts say, is to downplay the importance of looking like a model and instead make sure that you are modeling the behaviors you want your youngster to imitate. Set a positive example and then trust that he or she will eat and exercise just like you.

Beyond protecting their self-esteem, weight control authorities offer these pointers for helping your child diet down:

- **Make subtle changes.** Change your child's diet gradually. For example, switch from regular milk to low-fat to skim. Give your child one cookie in his lunch. Offer smaller servings of high-fat and high-calorie foods.
- **Clean house.** Your child can't snack on unhealthy foods like cookies, candy and chips if they aren't in the house. Instead, stock up on snacks such as cereal bars, low-fat popcorn or pretzels and fresh or dried fruit. Also limit your child's soft-drink intake.
- **Hold back the treats.** Don't ban any food completely because your child may crave it even more. Instead, dole out treats on occasion. Be careful not to use food as a reward. That can create poor eating habits for life.
- **No force feeding!** Don't force your child to clean his plate because this may cause him to eat more than he may need and he will not learn to say "that's enough!" That behavior will carry over into adulthood.
- **Hold back on liquids.** Provide liquids at the end of the meal so your child's stomach won't get too full and he'll eat what you've put before him.
- **Limit portions.** Make portions smaller. This teaches your child to eat until he is satisfied—not until he is stuffed.
- **Slow down!** Encourage your child to eat more slowly. This will allow the stomach ample time to signal the brain that the body is full and that it's time to stop eating.
- **Avoid diets.** Do not put your child on a diet. Instead, provide well-balanced meals that include fruits, vegetables and grains.
- **When your child won't eat.** If your child won't eat what you've fixed them, ask him what it is he doesn't like. Discover whether it's the texture or flavor of the food and then offer it with cheese or seasoning, for example.
- **Have fun with food!** This encourages your child to become more interested in eating food. Stick a waffle in the toaster, for example, and let your child decorate it with fresh fruit.

- **Get your child involved.** Kids who help make a meal take more enjoyment in eating. Have your child make a green salad or a fruit bowl.
- **Turn the TV off!** Set a daily limit on the number of hours your child is allowed to watch TV, use the computer or play video games.
- **Keep your child moving.** Try to get your child to take part in physical activity at least 3-4 times a week. You don't have to register him in an organized sport, but if he likes sports, have him participate year-round.
- **Engage in family exercise.** Some great family activities include swimming, bowling, skating, shooting hoops or even taking a walk.
- **Set weekly exercise goals.** You may think about linking your child's success to his allowance—or give him a bonus if he meets or exceeds the goal.