

How to prevent obesity in children

By Karla Rodas

Obesity and the high number of overweight children continue to rise in the United States. According to 1999-2000 data from the Centers for Disease Control, 15 percent of children and teens ages 6 to 19 are overweight. The numbers have almost tripled for adolescents in the past 2 decades. That number accounts for almost nine million children and teens.

Although this problem affects children from all ethnic backgrounds, Hispanic youth are tipping the scales. According to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, Mexican-American children ages 6 to 11 were more likely to be overweight than Black or White children. Mexican-American adolescents ages 12 to 19 were more likely to be overweight than White adolescents.

An overweight child or adolescent has an increased risk of heart disease, high cholesterol and high blood pressure. There is also an increased risk of Type 2 Diabetes which was once considered an adult disease.

Steps can be taken to prevent obesity from following an adolescent into adulthood. Some of the causes of obesity are inactivity and unhealthy eating. One way to turn that around is get the entire family moving and adopting a healthy lifestyle.

“It needs to be a family thing,” said Leah McClanahan of the San Diego Coalition on Children and Weight.

Parents should be role models for their children and get active in order to help their children, she said.

The Coalition on Children and Weight in San Diego provides families with resources to prevent and treat childhood obesity.

Children's Hospital of San Diego recommends changes in diet and exercise to help an overweight child lose weight or maintain weight as the child grows. These are some of their recommendations for parents:

- Let your child snack on low-fat foods like raw fruits, vegetables, and pretzels instead of junk food.
- Encourage your child to drink water instead of soda and juice.
- Reduce fat in your child's foods. Try baking, broiling and steaming instead of frying. This is a good idea for the whole family.
- Serve more fresh fruits, vegetables, whole grains and salads, but avoid calorie-heavy salad dressings, sauces and cheeses.
- Try eating non-fat milk, yogurt and other low-fat dairy products instead of whole milk products.

Healthy changes in diet are important but exercise is also critical. There are many opportunities for physical activity offered by the YMCA, San Diego Parks and Recreation and the Boys and Girls Clubs. One such program at the South Bay Family YMCA is the YFitsquad.

The youth fitness program is for 10 to 13 year olds and each session lasts six weeks. The students are in a small group and are taught by a trainer how to properly use equipment in the fitness center. Trainers also teach them about over nutrition.

The atmosphere isn't competitive and the trainers are nurturing, said Tony Fajardo, YMCA Department Head of Membership and Fitness.

“We want to instill a foundation of fitness for lifelong use,” said Fajardo.

For more information and resources parents can contact:

The Coalition on Children and Weight website: www.ccswd.net.

The City of San Diego Parks and Recreation (619)525-8219

www.sannet.gov/park-and-recreation

Boys and Girls Clubs of Greater San Diego 1-866-SDYOUTH

www.sdyouth.org

YMCA of San Diego County

(858) 292-4034

www.ymca.org

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