

A CHILDHOOD OBESITY SPECIAL ON

SUPERSIZED

Local experts recommend strategies for reducing this growing childhood epidemic

In the past 30 years, childhood obesity has doubled in the U.S. Experts project that by 2030 nearly 51% of the population will be obese. Parental concern for the epidemic is more important than ever with childhood obesity affecting approximately 12.7 million children and adolescents 2 to 19 years of age. “Limited activity and too many calories, either overeating or eating a lot of high-calorie foods, are the main causes of obesity,” says Dr. Lisa White, DO, FAAP, of Sprout Pediatrics. Families affected should take action to prevent and conquer the epidemic of childhood obesity.

Making Lifestyle Changes

Katy parents should talk to their kids about obesity if they are worried. “Parents should be honest with their kids about needing to be healthy,” Dr. White advises. However, she recommends parents to avoid using sensitive words like “fat” and work on encouraging kids to end unhealthy habits to become healthier. If parents are insensitive, the child may react negatively to the situation and refuse to participate in making changes.

For parents of children facing obesity, Dr. White suggests making small, healthy changes for the whole family. Families should consider setting health goals that are reachable because it is easier to focus on achieving attainable goals one at a time.

Striving for grand, multiple goals may be more difficult. It leads families to lose focus, and eventually become discouraged. Experts suggest starting one at a time. For example, a 20-minute walk every other day after school can be a small goal. After achieving the first goal, a new one can be set - such as increasing it to a 30-minute walk. Incremental changes give better results when maintained over a long period of time.

Preventing Chronic Disease

Like other chronic diseases, childhood obesity can be prevented. Moderation of food intake and regular physical activity are keys to preventing childhood obesity. Physical activity requires regular practice and can be planned.

A fondness for certain foods can start at a very young age. It may be difficult to keep kids completely away from unhealthy foods, but it is achievable to limit or control unhealthy food intake and encourage eating more fresh fruits and vegetables. Along with teaching healthy habits at an early age, childhood obesity can be prevented by maintaining healthy levels of activity. “If kids grow up eating healthy and being active, it is easy [for kids] to maintain that lifestyle,” Dr. White says.

It is also easy to reward kids with food, but this is not a good practice. “This can encourage unhealthy attitudes toward food that can extend far into adulthood,” Dr. White cautions. She advises that it may be better to let the child choose a small toy or activity as a reward for good behavior.

There is some junk food that parents should avoid purchasing for their kids. Empty-calorie foods such as soda and unhealthy snack foods do not satisfy appetites for very long, so the child will likely end up needing to eat again soon. “It is better to have one bigger snack with protein, fats, and carbohydrates,” says Dr. White. Snacks like peanut butter, fruit, cheese, yogurt, nuts, or a turkey sandwich are great options.

Avoiding Junk Food

The best approach for parents is to stock up on healthy foods and limit junk foods in the home. “No food should

KIDS

Written by Wendy Teng

be completely off limits - that can create bad habits of hoarding or sneaking food. The junk food can also be introduced occasionally, like dessert or soda only when out to dinner," says Dr. White. Parents should teach kids to eat unhealthy foods in moderation and explain to them that junk foods may taste good now, but eating too much can be harmful.

For kids over 8 years old, exercise may be more helpful. Dr. White suggests, "Older kids who are overweight may have a similar diet to their healthy weight friends so exercise is an important addition."

Exercise should not be a daily chore. It should be something fun that kids look forward to.” A central focus should be placed on moving their bodies and working up a sweat. Kids will be motivated to participate if it’s a fun activity they enjoy, such as playing outside with friends or biking around the neighborhood.

Parents should also guide their kids to try different hobbies or activities outside the house. Register them to try dance or swim lessons, encouraging them to join a sports team, or even taking them to the gym are great ways to promote physical activity and allow children to discover their talents and interests. If parents are able to participate with their children too, it would also bring quality family bonding time. Some children will also feel more motivated seeing that their parents are willing to participate.

Bullying About Weight

It can be a difficult time for parents of children facing obesity. They may often feel social pressure “to get things right” when dealing with physical health, but it is important to note that their child may also deal with the social stigma in public. “Sometimes children can be bullied or ostracized for their weight. They may have trouble playing with friends - either not being asked to join in a game or just being made fun of,” says Dr. White.

While also trying to make healthier lifestyle changes at the same time, the child may become more emotional. Some may be temperamental, while others want to give up trying due to demotivation from peers. Parents should consider their child’s feelings and try to be patient and understanding as their child is adjusting to health changes. KM

WENDY TENG is a freelance writer. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, writing, volunteering, trying new restaurants, and learning about new organizations.

COMMON OBESITY TRAPS

1. Don't reward good behavior with food. This encourages eating even when not hungry.
2. Limit screen time. Instead, increase active play time.
3. Replace snacks that are high in fat with fruits and veggies.
4. Limit soda consumption and drink more water.
5. Don't skimp on sleep. Fatigue can alter appetite-regulating hormones.
6. Don't use food as a coping mechanism for stress.

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