

Childhood Obesity May Reduce Life Expectancy by Five or More Years

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Childhood obesity is now a public health problem, in all countries and at all social levels! According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the number of obese or overweight young children has increased at an alarming rate from 32 million globally in 1990 to over 42 million in 2016. If current trends continue, the number of overweight or obese infants and young children globally will increase to 70 million by 2025.

About one in three American kids and teens are overweight or obese; nearly triple the rate in 1963. Child obesity has quickly become one of the most serious health challenges of the 21st century.

The fact that increasing numbers of children are becoming overweight has worrisome implications for the future. Perhaps given that malnutrition was commonplace, and may remain so in rural areas, people might see chubbiness in children as a good thing. Parents might give their children “treats” that are in fact unhealthy - with fat and sugars, but little in the way of vitamins, minerals and other healthy micronutrients. They may even think having their kids at home watching tv or playing on computers is safer than them being outside.

Frequently, childhood obesity is the result of a flawed lifestyle. Although genetics can be a factor, it is much more common now for children to be obese or overweight because of environmental and behavioral factors.

People are becoming ever more aware that obesity has reached epidemic proportions globally. Yet there is less appreciation of the severity of childhood obesity, even though it may rank among the most serious public health challenges of this century. It is a severe challenge because overweight children can suffer ill health, both physically and emotionally, and are more likely to become obese adults, with a host of potential health problems.

Unfortunately, unlike other bad habits, kids are not growing out of being unhealthy, but instead are growing up to become unhealthy adults. Not every obese adult was an obese child. However, every obese child is under a serious risk of becoming an obese adult.

Statistically Challenged

An overweight child at 2 years of age has a 15% chance of becoming obese as an adult. At 5 years old, the chances increase to 35%. At 7 years old, 30% of obese children will be obese adults and at age 10, 80% of obese children will be obese adults.

70% of obese children have already one risk factor for heart disease and 30% already have 2 or more risk factors. More than 50% of children's diabetes type II diagnoses are related to obesity and overweight or obese children are 52% more at risk to develop asthma. The scary scientific information is that childhood obesity may reduce life expectancy by five or more years.

Around the world, approximately 25% of children don't participate in a free-time physical activity. The more time that they spend in front of a screen (TV, cellphone, videogame, or computer) the more likely they are to gain weight. A typical child spends approximately 4 to 5 hours a day watching TV, using the computer or playing video games.

Unhealthy snacking leads to an additional 200 calories every single day for kids. Based on diet recommendations established by the United States Department of Agriculture, only 2 percent of children have a healthy diet. In fact, in a survey of high school seniors, only three out of every 10 report eating vegetables “nearly” every day. Of the vegetables consumed, one-fourth is in the form of french fries or potato chips.

We Must Act Now

Importantly, however, the rise in obesity is by no means inevitable. One key factor for obesity prevention is education for both parents and their children. Plus, supportive environments can play a fundamental role in shaping for success and it is as simple as repeating advice that many parents and grandparents have surely passed on through generations: eat healthy food and do some exercise.

Changes in diet and energy expenditure are the most effective actions to face this challenge. To prevent and fight against childhood obesity we have two great windows of opportunity - school and family.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention emphasizes that schools should play a particularly critical role by establishing a safe and supportive environment with policies and practices that support a healthy lifestyle. Children usually have at least one of their meals at school, so schools should provide opportunities for students to learn and practice healthy eating and physical activity behaviors.

Over my more than three decades of experience as a pediatrician and nutritional expert, dealing with, treating and preventing childhood obesity, I’ve observed many good and bad behaviors and one piece of advice seems to reign true and effective every time for families - Actions Speak Louder Than Words.

Children pay much more attention to what parents, doctors, nutritionists, uncles, grandparents, teachers, friends, etc. do than in what they say. The best and most effective way for a child to adopt a healthy and active lifestyle is for the influencers in their lives to lead by example and adopt that lifestyle first. So, if you eat fruit and vegetables, your children will do so as well - even if this takes time. By contrast, if you often skip wholesome meals and readily eat fast food, your children may adopt these unhealthy habits. When preparing or choosing meals for your kids, aim to limit foods that are high in sugar, salt and saturated fats.

Combating obesity does not end with good nutrition; being active is vital. The WHO recommends children aged 5 - 17 years should accumulate at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous-intensity physical activity every day to boost their physical fitness and deliver a host of benefits including optimizing bone health.

Creating a routine can help with this. For instance, if you are a parent you might schedule a couple of activity days per week. Plus, planning fun and simple activities like hopping, and kicking and catching balls, can greatly benefit developing children. If you get involved at times, you can lead by example, while getting exercise that will also help boost your fitness and overall health.

By doing so, we will improve children’s lives, both now in their childhood, and throughout their adult lives. It would make a significant difference preventing and fighting the global obesity epidemic as early in life as possible and it would change the world into a healthier and happier place.

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