

Focusing on a Weighty Subject: Childhood Obesity

Childhood obesity is a major problem in the United States. In fact, Michelle Obama recently kicked off her campaign to fight childhood obesity--an initiative aptly titled "Let's Move." Her website, www.letsmove.gov reports that Americans spend \$150 billion every year to treat obesity-related conditions, and that number is growing.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report that

- 16% of children ages 6-19 are overweight or obese and
- 15% are considered at risk of becoming overweight.

Over the last three decades, the rate of childhood obesity has more than doubled for preschool children (age 2-5 years), adolescents (age 12-19 years) and tripled for children in between those two categories (age 6-11 years).

Experts predict that a child, who is overweight as an adolescent, has a 70% chance of becoming an overweight or obese adult. This number increases to 80% if one or more parents are overweight or obese.

Diagnosis:

Assessing obesity in children can be difficult because children can grow in unpredictable spurts. Most often, children become overweight from lack of physical activity or unhealthy eating patterns, or a combination of these factors. There are a few rare genetic diseases and hormonal disorders which may predispose a child to obesity. Your child's pediatrician will be instrumental in diagnosing and assessing your child.

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Risk Factors:

Healthnetwork's medical director, Susan Locke, M.D., spoke with **Robert Siegel, M.D., Medical Director of The Center for Better Health and Nutrition at Cincinnati**



Children's Hospital Medical Center to better understand risk factors for childhood obesity. Here are the points outlined by Dr. Siegel:

- **Diet:** High calorie foods are a main culprit. Regular consumption of fast foods, baked goods, soft drinks, candy and desserts often lead to weight gain.
- **Inactivity:** Inactive leisure activities contribute to the epidemic of obesity. Sedentary kids are more likely to gain weight.
- **Family:** If a child grows up in a household with overweight people, he or she is more likely to be overweight. Dr. Siegel confirms that there is a genetic component to childhood obesity. But a family's diet and lifestyle choices are key factors in whether or not a child will be overweight.
- **Socioeconomic factors:** There is a higher rate of obesity in low income families.

Complications:

Overweight children often are at risk for type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, sleep disorders, early puberty or menarche and skin infections to name just a few. The social and emotional complications of being an overweight child can be enormous. An overweight child is often the target of bullying which can lead to low self-esteem and depression.

Treatment:

To combat this epidemic, there are several recommendations we can make. Dr. Siegel feels that the message is getting out. In recent years, he notes that families are more receptive to discussing their child's weight problems with their pediatricians.

- In rare cases, a medication would be prescribed for an obese child or weight-loss surgery would even be considered.
- In most cases, the focus should be to involve the whole family in developing healthy eating habits and increasing physical activity.
- Lead by example, live a healthy lifestyle and your children will benefit by watching you make good food choices and pursue a more active way of life.
- Be sensitive to the needs of your child, help them discover healthy habits and changes they can make simply and maintain for life.

Healthnetwork Foundation will soon launch a new pediatric brochure and accompanying section on our website. Many of our pediatric centers of excellence have programs to assist families and children with weight issues. For more information on a program near you, please call Healthnetwork at 866-968-2467 or 440-893-0830.

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Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center is one of 10 children's hospitals in the United States to make the Honor Roll in the *U.S. News and World Report* 2009-10 America's Best Children's Hospitals survey. They are one of the three largest children's hospitals in the U.S. and #2 in pediatric research grant funding received from the National Institutes of Health. Cincinnati Children's is affiliated with the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine.



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Medical Director
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Follow Dr. Locke on our website. As she receives questions from our members, her research library continues to grow. Find her link on our home page:
www.healthnetworkfoundation.org.

Have a health question you want to ask Dr. Locke? Send an email to help@healthnetworkfoundation.org. All inquiries are kept private and confidential.

If you have questions about Healthnetwork or you would like a referral to one of our centers of excellence, please call our office:
866-968-2467 or 440-893-0830.