

The Healthy Kids Series

Unhealthy Kids

| BY BETH CLINE JOHNSON |



According to a 2006 study in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, nearly one-third of children ages 17 and under are considered obese or overweight. Of children ages 6-11, approximately 18.8% are considered overweight.

Obesity is most often determined by an individual's Body Mass Index, or BMI, a reliable indicator of body fat. For adults, BMI is calculated by height and weight, but for children, BMI calculations consider other factors. Because body fat varies by age and sex, a modified system, called the BMI-for-age, was created to establish parameters for healthy children. To test your child's BMI-for-age, visit <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/dnpabmi/Calculator.aspx>, a site maintained by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

A doctor can best explain your results, but a healthy BMI for a child is between the 5th and 85th percentiles for their age. A child above the 85th percentile has a risk of becoming overweight. A child with a BMI above the 95th percentile is considered currently overweight.

Obesity puts children at risk for a variety of health concerns including hypertension, type-two diabetes and sleep apnea. It also complicates a child's mental well-being with issues of poor self-esteem and social discrimination. Overweight children are also at a greater risk of becoming overweight or obese as adults because statistics show that about one third of all severely obese adults were overweight as children. As well, these children face an increased risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, osteoarthritis, respiratory problems and some cancers.

At its most basic level, childhood obesity is a result of an imbalance between the calories a child consumes through food and beverages and the calories a child burns for normal growth, metabolism and physical activity. The imbalance of calories can occur through a combination of factors including genetics, behavior and environment.

Health professionals are still investigating

the genetic link to obesity, but studies suggest that certain genetic characteristics contribute to a child's susceptibility to being overweight. However, obesity cannot be attributed solely to genetic factors. The genetic characteristics of the human population have not changed in the last thirty years but the prevalence of overweight and obese children has tripled.

Behavioral factors also put children at an increased risk for obesity. The combination of unhealthy eating and lack of physical activity creates a quick recipe for obesity. Participating in physical activity is important for children as it may have beneficial effects not only on body weight, but also on blood pressure and bone strength. Physically active children are also more likely to remain physically active throughout adolescence and into adulthood.

Environmental factors also play a key role in childhood obesity. These can include the following:

Home: Parent-child interaction in the home can have a profound affect on the behaviors of children. Studies have repeatedly shown that physically active parents with a healthy view of nutrition have children with the same healthy habits and values. Similarly, a child who sees a sedentary parent who snacks on junk food is more likely to do the same.

School: Schools provide an ideal setting for teaching children to adopt healthy behaviors. Things like offering nutritious meals in the lunchroom and encouraging children to be physically active throughout their school-day can combine with healthy habits at home to help children develop the skills to become healthy, normal-weight adults.

Community: In recent years, community organizations have begun recognizing their role in the health of children. An increase in sidewalks, safe bike paths and parks in neighborhoods encourages children and families to enjoy physical activities outside.

While getting children excited about

healthy eating and physical activity from an early age is the best defense against obesity, those who are already categorized as overweight or obese still have plenty of time to get healthy. Experts agree the best results come from making changes one at a time as a family. Begin with the creation of a healthy home environment:

Clean out the sugary drinks and snacks. Replace them with fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat dairy options.

Prepare healthful meals and snacks as a family. Local libraries and bookstores have a wide variety of cookbooks designed for a healthful eating. Also check out a searchable online database like cookinglight.com for healthy, family-friendly recipes.

Don't deprive children of their favorite foods. Instead, teach children about portion control. Many companies now offer 100-calorie or less snack packs of kid favorites like Chips Ahoy cookies and Cheese Nips crackers.

Get active together. Enjoy long hours of daylight with an after-dinner bike ride or a family game of touch-football.

Set fitness goals for each member of the family. Mom or Dad might choose to set their sights on a running event like the Marine Corps Marathon 10K. Kids can take on their own challenge of the one-mile Healthy Kids Fun Run.

Whether it means adding a little extra exercise to an already active day or gradually adding more vegetables to family meals, little changes in habits can make a child and family healthy for a lifetime. ❖

Articles in the Healthy Kids Series are presented by the Marine Corps Marathon Healthy Kids Fun Run to be held on Saturday, October 27, 2007. The one-mile run welcomes children ages 6-13. Registration is now open at www.marinemarathon.com. Beth Cline Johnson is the Public Relations Coordinator for the Marine Corps Marathon. No federal or Marine Corps endorsement implied.

