IT’S OFFICIAL: CHILDHOOD OBESITY HAS BEEN DECLARED A NATIONAL EPIDEMIC

By: David Kraybill, Executive Director, Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation

A recent White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity Report to the President, Solving the Problem of Childhood Obesity Within a Generation, released some startling information—childhood obesity has become an epidemic in America and it is now considered a national health crisis. An epidemic, by definition, is a rapid spread or development of something. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the rate of childhood obesity has actually tripled over the past 30 years. Obesity among children ages six to 11 increased from 6.5% in 1980 to 19.6% in 2008. Adolescent obesity in 12 to 19 year olds increased from 5% in 1980 to 18.1% in 2008.

In addition to these startling statistics, the Report to the President cited that one third of all children born in the year 2000 are expected to develop diabetes during their lifetime and the current generation may even be on track to have a shorter lifespan than their parents. The Report goes on to say that the epidemic of childhood obesity is costing more than $3 billion a year in direct medical expenses and that is likely to rise if not stopped. Childhood obesity will also have a potential impact on the United States’ military readiness. More than one quarter of all Americans aged 17-24 are unqualified for military service because they are too heavy.

What is obesity?
Obesity is defined by an accumulation of excess body fat. There are different criteria to determine if a child is considered obese. Two of the more common methods are measuring skin-fold thickness, which classifies a child as overweight if he or she has at least 25-30% body fat, and using Body Mass Index (BMI). BMI is the measurement of a person’s weight in relation to his or her height. To calculate BMI, multiply the person’s weight in pounds and divide that by the square of his or her height in inches. For adults, overweight is a BMI greater than 25; obese is a BMI greater than 30. Growth charts from the CDC are used to calculate a child’s BMI based on sex and age because of changes during growth and development. A child is considered overweight if his or her BMI is at or above the 85th percentile; they are considered obese if the BMI is at or above the 95th percentile for children of the same age and sex.

How did we get here?
There are a number of factors that have contributed to the childhood obesity epidemic. The tendency for a child to be overweight can actually start before birth. If the mother uses tobacco, gains excessive weight or has diabetes, that child has an increased risk of being obese during the preschool years.

Other contributing factors are the changes in the American lifestyle over the last 30 years. This includes eating more fast foods, convenience foods, and processed foods and drinking more sugar-laden beverages. Often, families don’t sit down together to have dinner anymore. Dinner is on the run and fit in between activities, which usually means going through the fast food drive-in. Add this factor to the decrease of exercise children are getting because of an increase in sedentary activities like TV viewing, playing video games, and socializing on a computer or cell phone. Also, children rarely walk or bike to school anymore. They are driven or take the bus. Children who watch a lot of TV are also more likely to snack; plus, getting too much “screen” time has
been associated with children getting less and poorer quality sleep. Insufficient sleep has been linked to a risk of obesity.

Children whose parents are overweight or obese are also at risk. The parents are not living a healthful lifestyle and that becomes the child’s role model. Surprisingly, psychological factors are a contributing factor. Overeating is a way to cope with problems or stress, and children start to use food as a way to feel better about their situations at home or at school. Finally, there are socioeconomic factors. Children of low-income families are at risk due to fewer resources and less time to make exercise and eating well a priority.

What are we doing?
Even with all this disconcerting news, the Report to the President is hopeful that we are prepared to fight this epidemic through knowledge of what the causes are, what the risk factors are and what we can do as a country, as individual communities and as families to stop the epidemic.

In February 2010, Michelle Obama launched her Let’s Move initiative to the nation. It is designed to get healthier foods in schools, give parents support to make healthier choices for their children, and get families up off the couch and active together. For more information on this program, go to www.letsmove.gov.

The Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation continues to make strides in changing the health habits of area residents. The Foundation funds programs and services through grants to area organizations and schools that focus on teaching children and their families to live healthier lives.

About the Series – Childhood Obesity  This four-part article series was developed by the Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation. Corresponding Webisodes featuring local experts can be found on www.missionhealthyliving.org. The second article will discuss the warning signs, risk factors and long-term affects of childhood obesity. The third article will discuss what schools are doing across the nation, the state of Pennsylvania and in Greater Pottstown to combat childhood obesity. The final article will focus on what parents and children can do to start to change their habits, lose weight and live healthier lives.

About the Foundation The Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation’s mission is to enhance the health and wellness of area residents, providing education, funding and programs that motivate people to adopt healthy lifestyles. Visit www.pottstownfoundation.org for more information about the Foundation. Discover Pottstown area’s new online community at www.missionhealthyliving.org to learn and share great information on how to lead a healthier life!