

Battling Childhood Obesity

Nurturing the health and
wellness of school-age children

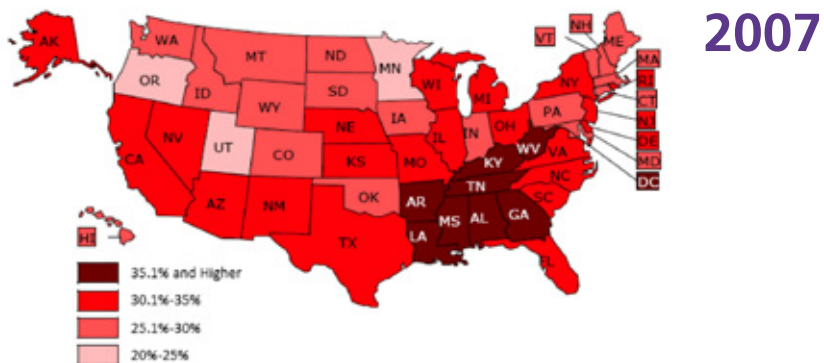
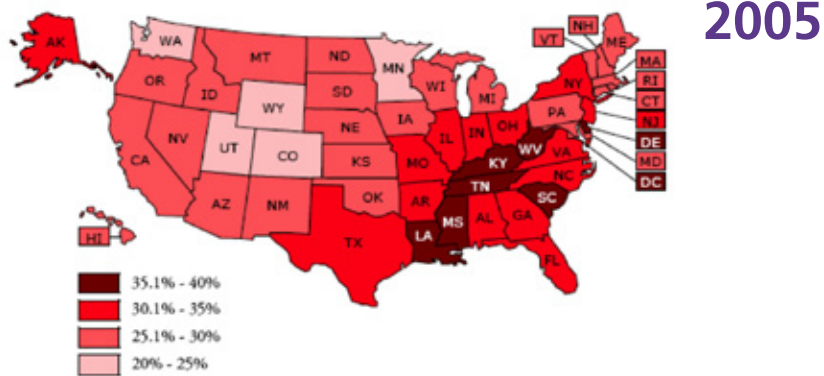
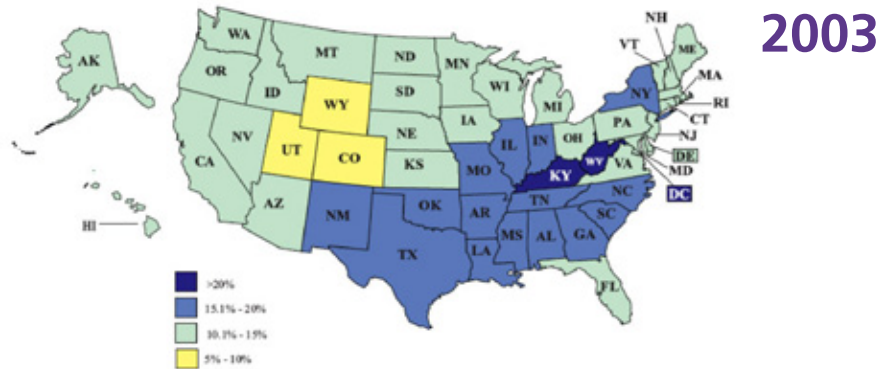


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A Generation in Jeopardy

Rates of Overweight and Obesity in Children



A recent White House Task Force report to the President on childhood obesity, called *Solving the Problem of Childhood Obesity within a Generation*, released some startling information—childhood obesity has become an epidemic in America and 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 aged 6 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 1988.

If this growing trend continues, the future holds more bad news:

- One third of children born in 2000 will develop diabetes.
- If children are obese, they are ten times more likely to become obese adults.
- That could translate to \$3 billion per year in direct medical expenses.

Ultimately, this generation of children may have a shorter lifespan than their parents—a historical first.

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 to 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.



[Body Mass Index Calculator for children ages 2 through 19 years old.](#)

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. During pregnancy, 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, 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. 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.



Dr. Laurie Betts of the Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation talks about the national epidemic.

Risk Factors, Warning Signs and Long- Term Effects



Introduction

Too often, parents make excuses why their child is overweight, or worse, not even realize that their weight is becoming a problem:

It's baby fat.

She'll outgrow it.

He's just a good eater.

She is just big-boned.

His dad is big too,
so it's in the family.

Unfortunately, ignoring the warning signs that your child is gaining weight or is already obese can have significant effects on their current and future physical health and surprisingly, their psychological health, too.

It is important that parents take the responsibility to feed their children healthy foods and monitor their intake in the early years, so that good eating habits stay with them for life. However, all too often, it is easier to let children self-monitor what they are eating due to their or your schedule. The reality is that parents need to be just as concerned about what their children eat as they are about teaching them not to get into cars with strangers.

Risk Factors

Diet: Regularly eating high-calorie foods such as baked goods, fast food, fried food, vending machine snacks, sugary drinks, candy and desserts can easily cause a child to gain weight. All these foods lack significant nutritional value and are high in sugar, fat and calories.

Lack of exercise: Children tend to spend more time in front of the TV, the computer and video games and less time outside playing sports, walking and riding bikes. Children who do not exercise much are likely to gain weight because they are not burning enough calories.

Family history: If a child comes from a family of overweight people or if one or both parents are obese, he or she is more likely to put on excess weight, especially if parents do not eat well, and if high-calorie food is always available and exercise is not encouraged.

Psychological factors: Children can overeat due to stressful school or home life situations. They also can turn to food to cope with any strong emotions or problems, or to fight boredom.

Family factors: Parents buy the groceries, and if they are buying high-calorie or convenience foods, this is probably contributing to a child's weight problem. Parents should limit the child's exposure to these types of foods.

Socioeconomic factors: Children from low-income backgrounds are unfortunately at higher risk. It takes both time and resources to make healthy eating and exercise a family priority.



The warning signs and risk factors according to Dr. Laurie Betts of the Pottstown Area Health & Wellness Foundation.

Warning Signs

Weight gain: This is definitely a sign that your child is probably not eating correctly, especially if your child is a teenager. Teens are usually in a growth phase, and they should be absorbing energy from their food, not putting on unnecessary pounds and getting obese.

Inactivity: If your child starts to become overweight, he or she will most likely become less active and lethargic. Children need to be active in order to develop properly. The amount of physical education they get in school is not enough. Exercising as a family can help assure your child is getting enough physical activity.

Depression: This is a very serious condition, and if you are concerned your child may be depressed, always seek professional help. Depressed children often overeat, seeking solace in food. This can lead to obesity and eating disorders.

Improper Eating: If children are not eating the healthy meals you've prepared, there is a good chance they have been snacking on junk food during the day or after school.

Meal Skipping: This could lead to bingeing or digestive problems. It is important to discourage children from skipping a meal because it will not help them lose weight, but it could actually lead to weight gain.

Food Obsession: When your child starts to turn to food instead of friends and family for support or comfort, this can be an unhealthy association and lead to obesity, as well as other problems.

Continual Snacking: This is a bad habit that will follow children into adulthood. Have healthy snacks on hand for after-school treats. It will help alleviate hunger pangs and offer nutritional value.



Short- and Long-Term Health Effects

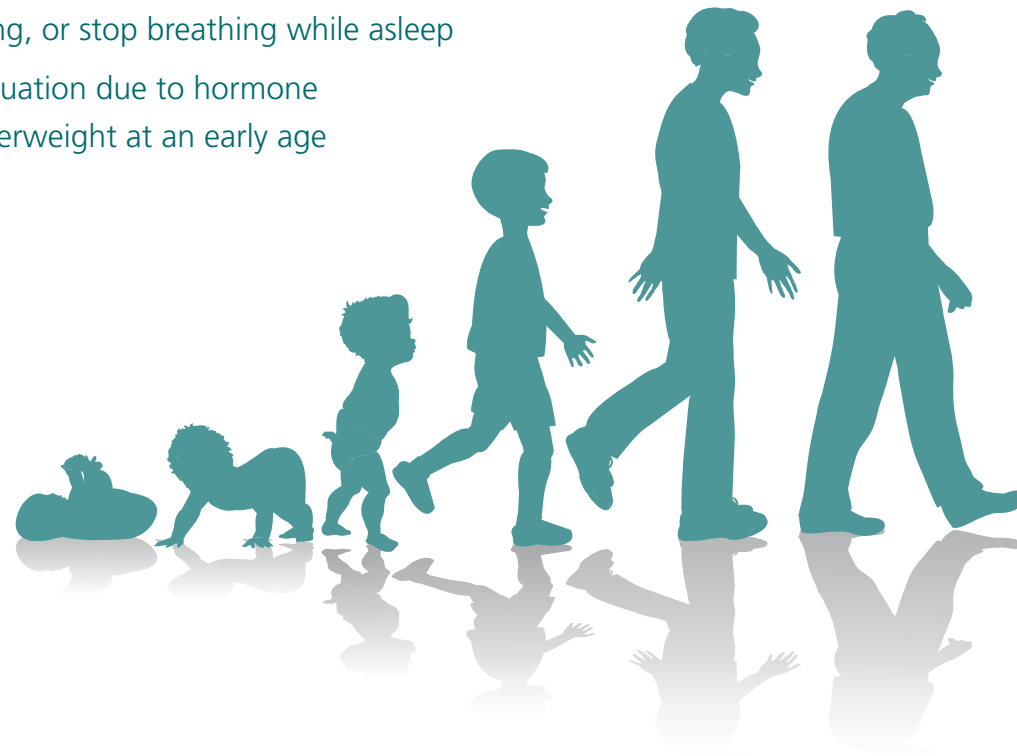
Ultimately, being overweight as a child puts the child at increased risk for having problems, both in the short term and the long term, with the child's physical, social and emotional well-being.

Physical complications include:

- Type 2 diabetes
- High blood pressure and high cholesterol
- Asthma and other breathing problems
- Sleep apnea, a condition in which your child may snore, have abnormal breathing, or stop breathing while asleep
- Early puberty or menstruation due to hormone imbalances of being overweight at an early age
- Gallstones
- Liver problems

Social and emotional complications include:

- Suffering from low self-esteem and bullying
- Behavior and learning problems
- Depression



Best Practices at Home



Parental First Steps

As a parent, you have the most influence over your child's eating habits. One of the most important first steps you can take is to commit to change as a family. Embarking on this journey as a family will enable long-term success because what you do will become a way of life in your household and consistently be reinforced. Remember, parents help build and shape lifelong eating patterns and children are likely to model the food and meal rituals of their families.

First, if your eating habits are less than perfect, don't stress—bad nutritional habits can be changed. It's important to set the example, however. Second, it is imperative that parents set down some rules in regard to how their children view food. Do not use food as a reward or a way to cope with emotions, especially depression. Finally, you want to teach your child the importance of healthy eating both at mealtimes and at snack time.

Teaching your child how to satisfy their cravings with options that are low in fat and contain simple sugars are lessons that will last a lifetime. Showing and telling them the benefits of eating healthier will also go a long way.

Good rules to follow for nutritional eating include:

- Limit sodas or high sugar drinks
- Eat more fruits and vegetables
- Increase physical activity
- Eat more protein, nuts, and leaner meats



Learn how parents and schools can promote the benefits of buying local, healthy foods.

The Role of Schools

Children should have good, nutritious food to eat and the chance to be physically active every day, so that they grow up into healthy adults.

*White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity
Report to the President*

According to a recent study on Kids and Nutrition, nearly two-thirds of kids rated themselves excellent or pretty good on healthy eating, and their moms agreed. Kids have a simple concept of what healthy eating means: (1) eating fruits and vegetables and (2) limiting too much bad food. And, their top three sources for knowledge about healthy eating are:

- Parents
- Teachers
- Nurses/Doctors

It's important, then, that each of these primary resources equip kids with the knowledge to make smart decisions. Federal and Pennsylvania law require that schools have Wellness Councils and policies to address childhood obesity. The White House Task Force report on childhood obesity presented two recommendations involving schools:

1. **Provide healthy food in schools.**
2. **Increase opportunities for more physical activity in schools.**



Learn how East Vincent Elementary Kindergarten incorporates programs to encourage students to sample new foods as healthy snacks options.

Nutrition on a Budget

Eating healthy does not have to be expensive. Making just a few behavioral shifts will strike the right balance between feeding your family responsibly while remaining on a budget. For instance:

Eat less meat. Experts suggest that Americans indulge in their passion for meat more often than they should. By reducing intake, it is possible to invest in better quality meats to balance additional costs. Additionally, incorporating other sources of protein, such as poultry or beans, creates a more well-rounded diet.

Consider whole grains. Whether bread, cereal or pasta, steer clear of refined or white flour in favor of whole grains. As is the case with fruits and vegetables, whole grains offer a bevy of necessary vitamins and minerals to support a balanced diet.

Buy bulk in moderation. There is a difference between buying bulk paper supplies versus fresh fruits and vegetables. Unless you plan to preserve, can or freeze for later use, often produce will go to waste in refrigerators. Also, pay careful attention to expiration dates.

Drink more water. Sugary beverages equal empty calories and can easily raise your grocery tab. Water is essential, and in the best scenario, tap water is free.

Mix and match. By planning ahead of time, you can outline family meals that stem from a standard group of healthy ingredients, while still offering the variety you crave.

Snack responsibly. It's inevitable that snack foods will find their way into our grocery baskets. By including healthy snacks, as well as an indulgence or two, on your list, you can curb detrimental and pricy impulse purchases.



Through the use of humor and creativity, watch for insightful tips on how parents can involve their kids in the kitchen.



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 online community at www.missionhealthyliving.org to learn and share information on how to lead a healthier life. You can also follow Mission Healthy Living on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

More Info:

www.missionhealthyliving.org

Contact Us:

152 E. High St., Suite 500

Pottstown, PA 19464

Phone: 610-323-2006

Fax: 610-323-0047

www.pottstownfoundation.org

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