

Epidemic of childhood obesity

At a recent annual meeting of the American College of Nutrition that I attended in Las Vegas, Nevada, a series of presentations were devoted to the growing problem of childhood obesity in the U.S.

The subject is of urgent importance because of all nutritional interventions that we as health professionals can undertake, the identification and reversal of obesity in children could possibly have the most impact on the health of Americans. Overweight kids are at enormously higher risk to become overweight adults. Because we know that obesity carries with it the attendant risks of heart disease, hypertension, stroke, diabetes, arthritis and certain common forms of cancer, early intervention could have a huge impact on the nation's health, slashing health care costs dramatically and improving the well-being of our populace.

The statistics cited were alarming. Obesity among U.S. children has increased significantly since 1960 by 54 percent in children 6 to 11 years of age and by 40 percent for adolescents. According to Dr. Theresa A. Nicklas of the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, the increase in obesity among children parallels that in adults in the U.S. Current statistics reflect that half of adults in the U.S. are currently considered obese or overweight. It was reported that 10 year-old children were generally 11 pounds heavier in 1995 than they were 1973. This was not accompanied by an increase in height.

Reasons cited include changes in dietary intake as well as curtailment of opportunities for physical exercise. Specifically, despite a decrease in per capita fat intake as a result of dietary fat phobia, U.S. children have tended to eat more protein and calorie-laden carbohydrates. Intake of sugary soft drinks has supplanted milk, and fewer meals are taken at

home. Exercise has been limited by cutbacks in school physical education programs, more time allocated to TV and the advent of sedentary pastimes such as computer games and the Internet.

The solution, according to the experts convened at the American College of Nutrition meeting, is to provide more funding for early intervention programs to identify children at risk for obesity and to undertake remediation. Medical doctors have, unfortunately, been asleep at the switch when it comes to this issue. They need to encourage parents to change kids' diets and to encourage physical activity. This isn't easy, especially when parents encourage a culture of obesity that puts their kids at risk. There needs to be a major public health initiative to combat this problem. At present, paltry dollar allocations address childhood obesity in view of the vast sums of money the government and pharmaceutical industries spend to treat the diseases that are the ultimate consequences of early life weight problems.