



Preventing Early Death from Obesity or Diabetes

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(This article was published in the Marin Scope Community Newspaper of July 29 - Aug. 4, 2003)

Obesity has become an increasingly serious problem in the United States. An estimated 300,000 Americans die each year from obesity related conditions. Unfortunately, many overweight individuals are still not concerned about changing their lifestyles to a healthy one in order to prevent obesity related diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

With less physical activity, greater dependence on technology and an abundance of fast food, the obesity rate has increased at an epidemic rate in the past two decades. The number of people who are overweight has gone from 33 percent to 35 percent and that of people who are obese has gone from 15 percent to 27 percent (NHANES II and NHANES 1999 data). The most drastic increase occurred in children; the prevalence of obesity has nearly tripled in the past 20 years. (The Surgeon General) The current estimate is that 15 percent of children between the ages of six and 19 years of age are overweight.

Twenty-five years ago, diabetes only occurred in adults over the age of 40. But today diabetes now occurs in children as young as eight or nine years of age because they are overweight. "We still don't fully understand the detail of that connection. That's why Shape Up America! is holding a conference on this topic at Rutgers University in November to discuss the relationship between obesity and tide to diabetes, especially in children," said Dr. Barbara Moore, president and chief executive officer of Shape Up America!

Overweight in children is defined as a Body Mass Index (BMI) (weight in kilograms divided by height in meters squared) at the 95th percentile or higher. There isn't a good standard to be used in children yet, although this is a very active area of research. "I am hopeful that in the next year or two that some of these standards in children will be available so that we can recommend body fat standard in children in the near future," said Moore.

Dr. Michelle Wolf, a professor of broadcast and electronic communication arts at San Francisco State University, who has done research on body image, suggested that it is vital for the parents to help their children to stay away from being obese. "Physical education is being cut, I think it is one of the more important things that we should be keeping. But those habits have to go outside of the school and into the family. If you just have kids to do half an hour of PE in school and they aren't supported outside, then it doesn't do much good in terms of adopting it as a lifestyle," said Wolf.

Besides encouraging children to be more physically active, guiding them to eat foods with nutritional value is also necessary to keeping them healthy. Dr. Jonelle Rowe, senior medial advisor on adolescence health at the Office On Women's Health, is working to change behavior in young people. "The pattern is just set about how you eat, and how much activity you do really when you are in adolescence," she said.

Information for parents on how to help their children avoid being overweight is provided by the public services. The Marin County Children and Weight Coalition is one of the many public services that provide information on health issues related to nutrition and obesity. Co-chaired by Jane Chin Young and Beverly Busher, the coalition promotes healthy lifestyles and addresses local issues regarding childhood obesity to anyone who wants to learn more about the subject.

There are a number of programs that are working on getting people to be more physically active and programs that provide information about changing diet and what people need to do to change their diet. "We have the information on what to do, there's no question what people need to do," Wolf said. "The issue is getting people to do it."

RESOURCES:

UC Berkeley Center for Weight and Health:
www.cnr.berkeley.edu/cwh/activities/child_weight2.shtml#com

Marin County Children and Weight Coalition:
http://cemarlin.ucdavis.edu/Nutrition,_Family_and_Consumer_Sciences/

Shape Up America!: www.shapeup.org