

NEWS RELEASE

Childhood Obesity

Childhood obesity is reaching epidemic proportions. Today, 40 percent of children and teens are either overweight or obese.

“Nationally, the percentage of young people who are overweight has more than doubled in recent years. Obesity is now the most common health problem of children and adolescents in the United States,” says Dr. Zahrine Bajwa, coordinator for the Expanded Food and Nutrition education Program of Cornell Cooperative Extension.

Obesity in children is determined by using BMI-for-age percentiles: “Overweight” is defined as a BMI-for-age above the 85th percentile; “Obesity” is defined as a BMI-for-age at or above the 95th percentile. You can find a handy BMI-for-age calculator on-line at <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/dnpabmi/Calculator.aspx>.

Parents should take an active role in supporting healthy eating and physical activity. Parents should talk to their child’s health care provider about their child’s weight status. As role models, parents can guide their children in developing healthy eating and physical activity patterns and TV viewing habits.

Obesity in children threatens to shorten their life spans, increases the likelihood of chronic diseases, and lowers the quality of lives. “According to the CDC, a severely obese person – one with a BMI greater than 40 - has more than seven times the risk for diabetes, and six times for the risk high blood pressure than a person who maintains a healthy weight,” says Susan Wilk, Coordinator of the Diabetes Resource Coalition of Long Island.

Obesity is also a major contributor to heart disease, arthritis, diabetes and asthma. Being obese may impair children’s capacity to participate in the normal activities of childhood, and can even lead to social isolation. Improved nutrition and increased exercise can do much to reverse this growing health problem. Educators at Cornell Cooperative Extension recommend five or more servings of fruits and vegetables, and at least three servings of low-fat or non-fat milk or other low-fat dairy products every day. Children should get at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day.

“Sixty minutes of physical activity can easily fit into the lives of children. Limit the time your children spend in front of the television set. Take a walk or ride a bike together. Crispy vegetables, tasty fruits, and low-fat or non-fat yogurt are healthy snack alternatives to candy and chips,” says Alysa Ferguson, Registered Dietitian and Extension Educator. “Pay attention to beverages, since most children are taking in too many calories from sugary drinks. Low-fat or fat-free milk and water are the best beverage choices for children over 2 years old.” Flavored non-fat or low-fat milk is a much healthier choice than soda, juice or sugar-sweetened beverages,” she adds.

Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County has several programs for parents who want to prevent childhood obesity. For more information, contact Alysa Ferguson at 631-727-7850 x 342. To learn more about physical activity and healthy eating, visit the New York State Department of Health web site at www.nyhealth.gov or The Diabetes Resource Coalition at www.longislanddiabetes.org