

## **Childhood Obesity**

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Did you know that 22 million children under five are overweight or obese?

This alarming statistic comes from the International Obesity Task Force through the World Health Organization. This medical problem has reached epidemic proportions in Africa (20 percent in Zambia and Morocco), Egypt, and South America (25 percent). In the U.S., 60 percent of adults are obese and 15 percent of children. In the past two decades, this number has doubled because of behavior, diet, and sedentary lifestyles.

Professionally, I am concerned about this trend because of the medical problems that arise from obesity, which include hypertension, dyslipidemia (high cholesterol), heart and gastrointestinal disease, and adult onset diabetes mellitus. Obesity has negative consequences that can keep our children from becoming healthy adults, given the morbidity and mortality risk. There is also the financial burden of attempting to treat the diseases that occur as a result of obesity.

Personally, I understand well the impact of obesity on medical health and well-being. At age 49, my husband suffered a heart attack caused by coronary artery disease, which resulted in a quintuple bypass. This was due to some genetic predisposition as well as environmentally accepted eating habits he learned as a youngster. This sudden event changed our family's nutrition and exercise strategy permanently.

I also struggled with weight after I ruptured the tendons of my right knee, requiring three surgeries and no exercise for a year. Not being able to exercise regularly affected my ability to control my weight. As a family, we all used this opportunity to promote better health habits and well-being in order to "thrive," both personally and in our medical practices. We now exercise daily while curtailing calories and making healthier food choices.

In our local schools, we participated in changing the quality of the school lunches through a parent group lobby. Soda machines were removed from three public high schools, and healthier fruits and energy snacks replaced snacks high in fat and sugars. On local school TV programs, students tried to focus attention on food producers to change their advertising and also to promote good snacks and exercise to young people.

We must head off the global explosion of obesity and its medical consequences that threaten 300 million people worldwide. By educating the public with a positive approach and developing wise government legislation, we can make a difference. Changes will come slowly but surely if we encourage daily movement and better judgments about the quality and quantity of our intake. Spending less time using computers, watching TV, and playing video games and more time dancing, taking movement classes, and climbing stairs will help. It's also important to keep the public better informed about the nutritive value of foods and the need to read labels and understand which foods provide effective fuel and which ones yield "empty" calories that are stored as fat.

Members of the medical community have a responsibility to serve as mentors and teachers in guiding patients on the path to good, preventative health. This includes discussions, written materials, and videos, as well as setting expectations for realistic weight loss, urging patients to avoid the "quick fix" of fad diets, and advising against smoking or drinking. Classes, such as Weight Watchers and Shapedown for teens, should also be encouraged. Physicians should aim to maintain a healthy BMI (Body Mass Index) and promote breast feeding so mothers don't overfeed with formula. Attention to reducing stress and having a life that is balanced will

help increase endurance. Striving to thrive and live longer and healthier should be the ultimate goal. This would give people the precious time to explore their passions and see the world from a healthier perspective.

The effort will need the support of all sectors of society—people willing to collaborate together to ameliorate a critical situation. Peace as we reach towards the objective to thrive and be prosperous. Let's clink our broccoli together to toast a healthy lifestyle!