

Childhood Overweight

Summary of Significant Trends:

Overweight and obesity have reached epidemic proportions and have become one of the most pressing health issues for our state. Overweight is an issue for all age groups, all races and all socioeconomic levels. Sixty percent of adults in the US are overweight. Our children are following in our footsteps with twice as many overweight children and three times as many overweight teens today as two decades ago.¹ If this trend is not slowed or reversed, it could eliminate the progress we have made in reducing the burden of weight related chronic diseases such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes and several forms of cancer.

Emerging Trends and Issues:

Overweight/Obesity is the first chronic disease whose spread looks like an infectious disease epidemic. If the present rate of increase continues, it will soon move from being the second most costly disease to being number one.¹ Increasingly, the problem is becoming a concern for children and youth as well as adults. The percentage of children who are overweight in the United States doubled during the past two decades and the percentage among adolescents almost tripled.

Relevance of Trends to County Programs:

The causes of overweight and obesity are multi-faceted. Both behavioral and environmental factors contribute to the rise in overweight children. Poor nutrition and physical inactivity are the leading causes of overweight and obesity and represent the best opportunities for prevention.^{1,2} While genetics play an important role in overweight and obesity, hereditary factors are not responsible for this epidemic.

Children's diets in the state and the nation are not what they should be to prevent overweight. In North Carolina children have diets that are too high in fat, sugar and calories while also being too low in fruits and vegetables. Fast food is widely available and its consumption and portion sizes continue to increase. Fewer and fewer meals are prepared and eaten at home. Vending machines selling soft drinks and high-fat snacks are common. Consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages has increased almost 500% over the past five years.³ Children start drinking soda at a remarkably young age and consumption increases through young adulthood.⁴

Children and youth also fail to meet physical activity recommendations. Societal changes have reduced opportunities for physical activity. There are fewer options for children to be active in their neighborhood due to safety issues or lack of parks, sidewalks or bike lanes. Physical activity in schools has been decreased to make

way for more emphasis on academics. Only 64% of NC high school students report participating in vigorous physical activity for at least 20 minutes on three or more days of the week.⁵ Children are watching 12 to 14 hours of television a week and spending more time playing video games.⁶

Addressing the issue of childhood overweight is a daunting task. Preventing overweight has implications for schools, communities, society and of course families. Families are the foundation of the solution to overweight and obesity. They provide child's first learning environment and have the potential to make their environment supportive of healthy eating and physical activity patterns that prevent childhood overweight. Families can also be powerful advocates for environmental and policy change to support healthy eating and physical activity outside the home.

References:

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2. Nutrition and Physical Activity Work Group. 2002. Guidelines for comprehensive programs to promote healthy eating and physical activity pp. XV. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
3. USDA, Continuing Survey of Food Intake by Individuals, 1994-1996.
4. Jacobson MF. Liquid Candy: how soft drinks are harming American's health. www.cspinet.org/sodapop
5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBS). Fact sheet: Youth risk behavior trends from CDC's 1991, 1993, 1995, 1997, and 1999 Youth Risk Behavior Surveys. www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash/yrbs
6. Cresp C, Smit E, Troiana R, Bartlett S, Macera C, Andersen R, Television watching, energy intake, and obesity in US children, Archives Of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine Vol 155. Mar 2001. www.archpediatrics.com

Sources of Supporting Data:

www.nhealthyweight.com
NC's state plan to address weight in children
www.cdc.gov
centers for disease control
www.nhealthyschools.org/nhealthyschools/htdocs/schooldata.htm
youth risk behavior data for NC
www.schs.state.nc.us/SCHS/
NC center for health statistics
see also links in reference list

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