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## dangers of childhood obesity

BY FRITZ ESKER

Obesity is an epidemic in America. Due to unhealthy diets and increasingly sedentary lifestyles, more and more Americans are becoming dangerously obese and are falling victim to type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and heart attacks earlier and earlier in life. While this is sad enough, what's even more heartbreaking is that America's children are becoming obese at younger and younger ages. And as a result, children will fall victim to ailments once thought to be limited to adults.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)), a 2008 survey found that an estimated 17% of children between ages 2 and 19 were obese. Between 1976 and 1980, only 5% of children ages 2-5 were obese. In 2007-2008, 10.4% of children in that age group were obese. Among children ages 12-19, obesity increased from 5% to 18.1% in the same time periods. 70% of obese children had at least one risk factor for cardiovascular disease. Aside from cardiovascular problems, obese children are at greater risk for bone and joint issues (because of

the extra weight they're carrying from an earlier age), as well as sleep apnea, arthritis, asthma, and diabetes.

While childhood obesity is a concern, it is important to know the difference between when a child is obese and when a child is simply big. The Mayo Clinic emphasizes that just because a child has a few extra pounds, it doesn't mean the child is obese. Children also carry different amounts of body fat at different stages of development. Therefore, it can be difficult for a parent to tell if a child is obese simply by looking at the child. It's best to visit a doctor's office and have the child tested and have the doctor measure the child's BMI (body mass index).

Some parents may be tempted to dismiss a child's obesity as genetic or hereditary, as if there's nothing that can be done about it. This is not true. The CDC states that in a few cases, excess body weight can be attributed solely to genetic disorders, but that this is the exception, not the rule. The recent rise of obesity in America cannot be solely attributed to genetic

factors. Genetic characteristics have not changed in the last three decades, but obesity has tripled in that time span.



And parents should take an active role in their child's health. Studies show that habits learned in childhood often carry on into adulthood. Obese children are more likely to become obese adults. Children who do

not exercise in childhood are less likely to exercise when they enter adulthood. The habits you teach your children now will often become habits that child takes with him/her into adult life. It cannot be stressed enough how children will take their cues from their parents. If you have bad eating habits and do not exercise, your

endless array of cable channels, more and more children are glued to their couches. Watching too much TV or spending too many hours playing video games means not only that a child is missing opportunities for exercise and play, but that the child is more likely to be snacking on junk food while watching TV (even as adults,



children are likely to follow suit. If you exercise and try to incorporate exercise in your child's routine (and make it fun), the children will likely want to exercise.

the majority of snacking gets done while watching TV). Also, TV shows have commercials for unhealthy snacks, which children are then likely to ask their parents to get for them.



While this may seem like an obvious statement, it bears repeating: the obesity epidemic in children has been in large part caused by the sedentary lifestyle of modern children. With video games, DVD players, and an

None of this means that children need to become fitness fanatics or long distance runners. Kidshealth.org points out that many acts of play are good workouts. Playing tag involves cardio work in children running away from the one who is "it." Swinging across the monkey bars on a playground involves strength. School age children should have a minimum of one hour of play or exercise every day. This underlines an important point: keep

exercise fun for your children and they will come back for more. Exercise with your children and you might have some fun for yourself as well!

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