

Kids and Body Weight

The facts:

- . Prevalence of overweight among school age children (6-11), has more than tripled from about 4% in the early 1970's to over 15% today. Rates are similar for boys and girls. Other industrialized countries, such as Canada and Germany, have experienced similar increases.
- . Some groups of children are affected more than others; for example, about 27% of Mexican-American boys and 22% of non-Hispanic black girls are overweight.
- . Adolescents from low income families (less than 130% of poverty threshold) are twice as likely to be overweight as children from families with higher income.
- . Overweight adolescents have a 70% greater risk of being overweight or obese adults and the risk increases to 80% if they have an overweight parent.
- . Obesity related health conditions once thought to be adult diseases (e.g., Type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol, hypertension, sleep apnea) have increased dramatically in overweight children.
- . Overweight children are also at higher risk for immediate psychological and social consequences, such as depression, low self-esteem and types of social discrimination.

What is causing this increase?

Our society is becoming more sedentary and we are practicing unhealthy eating patterns. For example:

- . A recent study found that 61% of kids age 9-13 do not participate in any organized physical activity and 23% report engaging in no free-time physical activity. Only 8% of elementary schools provide daily physical education, 49% offer intramural or physical activity clubs, and 71% provide "regularly scheduled" recess. At the same time, 43% of adolescents watch two or more hours of television a day.
- . Only 35-45% of school-age children meet the minimum dietary targets for fruits, vegetables, or meats, and only 2% meet the targets for all the food groups. By age fourteen, 52% of boys and 32% of girls are consuming three or more servings of soft drinks per day.

What is considered overweight?

Overweight is calculated with a body mass index (BMI) by the formula: $BMI = (\text{pounds} \times 703) / (\text{inches})^2$. This number is compared to growth charts for age and gender (see <http://cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/bmi/bmi-for-age.htm>). Kids above the 95th percentile are classified *overweight* and those between the 85th and 95th percentiles are classified *at risk of overweight*. "At risk" is usually about 15% above average weight for your height (e.g., about 10 lbs for the typical 9 year-old or about 15 lbs for the typical 13 year-old). "Overweight" is about 30% above average for a given height.

What can teachers do?

Change will take a coordinated effort. Try working with others in the school to get healthier meals and snack machines; don't give candy for rewards, protect recess time when possible, advocate for regular physical activity opportunities for kids, get parents involved with programs and education, share this information with administrators and school board members. In class: give interactive skills not facts (e.g., how to choose and prepare healthy foods, family participation, experimenting with different foods and

physical activities, experimenting with homework that involves *doing* in addition to reading). Be sensitive to mental and social issues overweight kids may face. And let the kids talk; for example, following this survey, you could ask them:

- *Why they think overweight is increasing?*
- *What they think can be done to make improvements?*
- *Why overweight kids don't feel as good about themselves, why they have a harder time making friends, and what they think they could do to help these kids feel better?*
- *Most know they are supposed to eat right and exercise, yet many don't; why? What gets in their way? What would make it easier for them?*

You may get some great ideas that could help you improve what you do with your class, your school, or your interaction with families.

Addresses for internet resources related to childhood obesity

Descriptions, research, charts and statistics

<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pubs/pubd/hestats/overwght99.htm>

www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity

<http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=4670>

<http://www.obesity.org/subs/childhood/prevalence.shtml>

<http://www.nal.usda.gov/fnic/pubs/topics/weight/childhoodobesity.htm>

www.healthinschools.com

Advice for families

<http://www.kidshealth.org/parent.htm>

<http://familydoctor.org/handouts/343.html>

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/invoke.cfm?objectid=40439628-A901-4432-A088B7DA0721BEC7>

<http://www.physsportsmed.com/issues/1998/06jun/kids.htm>

<http://www.niddk.nih.gov/health/pubs/helpchld.htm>

<http://www.apha.org/NPHW/facts/children.htm>

Interactive web sites for kids

www.kidshealth.org

www.kidnetic.com

<http://www.cspinet.org/smartmouth/index1.html>

Model programs and advice for teachers

www.healthykidschallenge.com/

<http://www.waytogokids.com/classes/index.html>

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/teach/fat/lesson2.html>

Great list of various links related to childhood obesity

www.obesity.chair.ulaval.ca