

America's epidemic of youth obesity

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That Americans are getting heavier is especially hard to deny the day after Thanksgiving. But America's weight problem has less to do with holiday binges than with everyday choices and circumstances. That's especially true for children, who are gaining weight in epidemic numbers, particularly in minority communities. Mexican-American and African-American children are twice as likely as non-Hispanic white children to have a body mass index of more than 25, the definition of overweight. In the last three decades, the number of overweight young Americans has tripled, with no sign the trend is abating.

Far from being just the stuff of cruel schoolyard taunts, the issue has serious long-term implications. For the first time, children are being diagnosed with weight-related chronic ailments that usually strike much later in life, including hypertension and Type 2 diabetes, popularly known as adult-onset diabetes -- a name that now needs rethinking. These diseased children are at risk, as similarly stricken adults are, for heart and kidney troubles, blindness and limb amputation, but at an earlier age. Further, as odd as it seems, a number of these children suffer from malnutrition from the unhealthy diets that made them fat. As they age, they can be expected to strain the health care system.

Genetics, while important, is just one piece of a larger physiological and psychological puzzle. At the National Institutes of Health, no fewer than 16 studies are being financed to study how to change environments to encourage a healthier lifestyle for young people -- from day care and after-school activities to educating children about food. "There is a panoply of forces that are all conspiring to get us to eat more and exercise less," says Dr. Susan Yanovski, director of an institute obesity and eating disorders program.

Young Americans eat, move and live quite differently than generations before them. Their lives have become sedentary, with more hours spent in front of a television or computer than at play or doing physically exerting work. With more two-income families and single-parent households, more children eat at cheap fast-food outlets, where sugary drinks and high-calorie choices in enormous portions abound. Two teenage girls who frequented a McDonald's in the Bronx recently went to court to blame Big Macs and Happy Meals for their excess weight, a lawsuit that the fast-food industry watched even as it called the action frivolous.

In many low-income minority neighborhoods, fried carryout is a cinch to find, but affordable fresh produce and nutritious food are not. Those same neighborhoods often lack many safe public places to play and exercise -- an essential part of any weight-management equation. Dr. Michael Myers, who works daily with obese patients in Los Alamitos, Calif., says that even when an ideal weight cannot be achieved, regular exercise and activity can delay or prevent the onset of health complications for an overweight child. While more study of the problem is needed, helping to make the victims of this epidemic more active cannot hurt either.

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