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- What construction projects?

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...from issue on 1/2008

Childhood Obesity: Fighting the Epidemic to Save Our Kids

By Julie Walsh

As a startling number of kids pack on excess weight, many groups are starting to battle this major threat to children's health. From state government to local PTAs, our community is recognizing that childhood obesity poses serious - even deadly - dangers.

At schools across SJ, students are finding new foods in the lunchroom: Pizza on whole-wheat crusts. Chicken nuggets that are baked, not fried. And slushies made of 100-percent juice, instead of sugar and water. These are just some of the changes coming to kids' lives, as experts begin to attack the childhood-obesity epidemic.

But parents must also do more to help kids stay fit, authorities say. "We have to cut back on fast food and increase physical activity," stresses Dr. Fred M. Jacobs, who retired last month as New Jersey's health commissioner.

Indeed, excess weight "puts kids at risk for developing many health problems," says **Adarsh Gupta, DO**, of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey School of Medicine (UMDNJ-SOM) in Stratford. Those problems include heart disease, cancer, diabetes, asthma and more - making obesity the second leading cause of preventable death after smoking.



Overweight kids face psychological challenges, too. "They may be teased; they may not have any friends," explains **Dr. Gupta**, who directs a weight management program for UMDNJ. "That can lead to loneliness, low self-esteem, depression."

And, he notes, "Obese children are more likely to become obese adults."

Combine these risks with the number of heavy kids - a third of all U.S. children, with government projections nearing 50 percent by 2010 - and it's clear we have a major health crisis.

"It's a huge problem," says Dr. Jacobs. And New Jersey is "not doing well" compared to other states, with 38 percent of sixth-graders overweight or obese.

If things don't change, we all face dire consequences, Dr. Jacobs warns - from staggering healthcare costs to reduced economic productivity. "It will threaten our standard of living and quality of life," he says.

In fact, today's teenagers comprise the first generation expected to live shorter and sicker lives than the previous generation, according to the report

from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

New rules, programs

New Jersey is taking action on multiple fronts. For instance, new state laws require schools to teach kids more about weight control, and to serve healthier meals. A federal law mandates additional nutritional standards.

The state also has created a nutrition and fitness office to promote good health habits - such as breastfeeding, which is linked to healthy weight levels in children - and to provide small grants for community projects such as walking clubs and school gardens.

Similarly, the national Parent Teacher Association (PTA) recently published guidelines "that promote physical activity in the school and at home, and healthier foods," says PTA member Kristina Dollbaum, who serves as health and safety director for Clara Barton Elementary School in Cherry Hill. "They're also starting a program to get kids walking together to school. Instead of carpooling, it's called walkpooling."

Dollbaum's position was created this school year in response to a federal mandate that required schools to start wellness programs by last September. The certified holistic health counselor is planning nutrition seminars while looking for healthier ways for students to raise money, "as opposed to selling food, candy and junk."

Under a new state law, schools can no longer serve candy and other foods that list sugar, in any form, as their first ingredient. Also, snacks and drinks can have no more than eight grams of fat per serving, including two grams of saturated fat, with the exception of nuts and seeds.

Among other requirements, drinks sold in New Jersey elementary schools must be milk, water or 100-percent juice, while rules for middle and high schools are less stringent.

"We're a leader in the country, in terms of school nutrition," says Dr. Jacobs, who spoke at dozens of schools statewide last year to promote good eating habits.

Plus, most New Jersey schools must also adhere to federal regulations, which limit the average fat content of school meals (to no more than 30 percent of weekly calories from fat), and contain other nutritional requirements.

School menu changes

On a recent day at Cherry Hill High School West, students chose from such healthier fare as chicken caesar salad, reduced-fat ham and cheese sandwiches and hot mixed vegetables. While fast food was still in abundance, it had been given a nutritional makeover. The pizza had a whole-wheat crust with reduced-fat cheese; the burgers and the cheesesteaks were served on whole-wheat rolls and baked instead of fried. Even the cupcakes were made with applesauce rather than oil, lowering their fat content and adding fiber, according to Aramark, the district's food vendor.

Nevertheless, Cherry Hill high-schoolers can still buy French fries, fried mozzarella sticks, sugary drinks and cookies at lunchtime - although portions are relatively small.

Cherry Hill West senior Amanda Malik likes to eat nutritiously, so she either packs a healthy lunch or buys a salad or wrap sandwich at school. But many of her classmates aren't so health-conscious. "Certain students aren't going to buy the salad. They're going to buy the fries," she says. "Fruit comes with lunch, but a lot of kids skip the fruit and buy a bag of chips to go with their lunch."

The challenge, experts say, is to offer school meals that are both nutritious and appealing to students.

Aramark, for instance, introduced new foods and colorful décor at Cherry Hill West's cafeteria this year to entice more students to buy school meals - which are often healthier than the alternatives children choose. "Research showed kids were skipping meals [at school] and then stopping at convenience stores after school and buying unhealthy chips," says Alicia Kent, Aramark's New Jersey district manager.

"Kids are bombarded by commercials for junk food," laments Cherry Hill's Dollbaum. And while many fast-food restaurants are adding more nutritious options, some observers say the pace of change is too slow.

"Having healthier choices is good," says Charlotte Markey, PhD, a body-image expert at Rutgers-Camden. "When the healthy choices outnumber the bad choices, then we've made progress."

Yet ultimately, parents have the biggest influence on children's eating and exercise habits, experts say. "Students who eat [healthy] items at school eat them at home," says Aramark's Kent. "They're the ones who're trying the different lunches."

Tips for parents

So, what can parents do to help their children avoid or reverse weight problems? Plenty, authorities note.

Start with the basics: Offer a variety of healthy foods, limit high-fat and high-sugar foods, and incorporate more physical activity into the family's day.

"Create a healthy food environment," Markey suggests. "Have healthy foods available, eat them yourself to be a role model for your children, and use moderation. It's okay to get fast food now and then, or to splurge sometimes. If we feel deprived, then we want more."

It's best to teach children about healthy foods and a balanced diet while they're still young, as it's harder to change their eating patterns later in life. "Good habits are important because they do last," says Markey.

For a balanced meal, serve protein (such as lean meat, nuts or beans), produce (fruit and vegetables), whole grains (like brown rice or whole-wheat bread), and low-fat milk products, says [Dr. Gupta](#). Such a meal will provide the nutrients needed for good health while satisfying kids' (and adults') appetites, making them less likely to overeat.

Markey notes that "exposure to healthy foods will increase liking for healthy foods. Even if it seems futile, strongly encourage kids to try new foods. Then praise them if they do."

Parents should also teach their children to eat appropriate amounts of food - based on nutritional needs rather than food companies' package sizes, which have increased dramatically over the years.

"We used to have a small muffin; now we have a huge muffin," says [Dr. Gupta](#). "We have big bottles of soda, big packages of French fries. Because of that, we eat more calories." (Proper serving sizes depend on a child's age and activity level; go to mypyramid.gov for guidance.)

"Discourage eating while watching TV," he adds, because studies show we eat more when we're distracted. It's also a good idea to eat slowly and to use a small plate for meals, says [Dr. Gupta](#). "It takes 30 minutes for your brain to tell you you're full. If you find you are still hungry, you can take more."

On the other hand, don't insist that a child clean his plate or eat when he's not hungry. "If they only eat when they're hungry, they're less likely to become overweight," says Markey.

Another cause of kids' excess weight is their growing use of video games, computers and TV, which has replaced much of the time children once spent playing outdoors.

[Dr. Gupta](#) advises parents to help kids be physically active for an hour a day, and to limit time spent using electronic devices to two hours a day.

"Do household chores, yard work, walk inside the house," he suggests. "Try organized sports, yoga, Pilates. Have kids play video games where they have to jump around."

Parents must get off the couch, too. "Practice what you preach," says the doctor. "If you want to teach anything to children, you have to do it yourself."

On the plus side, children have the advantage that they're still growing, so many heavy kids don't have to lose weight, but just stop gaining. As they grow taller, their weight will eventually become more proportionate to their height, [Dr. Gupta](#) explains. "Adults don't have the luxury of that height spurt."

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