

## Childhood Obesity a Crisis in America

Contributed by Isaac Eliaz, M.D., M.S., L.A.C.

There is a growing concern today that can potentially affect all of our children. All one need do is look at the data. The percentage of overweight children in the United States is growing at a rate that should alarm everyone, especially health care practitioners. Children are simply spending too little time exercising and more time in front of the TVs, computers, or video-game consoles. As today's busy families have fewer free moments to prepare nutritious, home-cooked meals; day in and day out, fast food is sadly becoming a staple in most families.

Childhood obesity is a major health problem. As defined by federal standards, approximately 30 percent of adults and 25 percent of children are considered obese today. The increase in this condition is resulting in an increase in the rate of diabetes. Type 1, or juvenile diabetes, is the more common form, but the rapid increase of type 2 is of particular concern. Type 2 diabetes affects 90 percent of the 18 million U.S. diabetics, but it is only recently that it has begun to show up in our children. Most children are diagnosed with type 2 diabetes during middle-to-late puberty. Physicians fear that as our children become increasingly overweight and less active, more type 2 diabetes may occur in younger pre-pubescent children. Children who are sedentary, overeat, and have a family history of diabetes are most at risk of contracting type 2 diabetes. Minority populations have an especially high rate of type 2 diabetes.

Even for those parents who provide a healthy lifestyle for their families by choosing organic foods, limiting or eliminating fast foods, as well as empty calories, cannot eliminate the harm posed by the temptations and pressures facing our children. It is imperative that education be provided to guide children to make healthy choices when they are not under the direction of their guardians by teaching them to be active and thoughtful about their dietary and exercise habits. Helping our children lead healthy lifestyles begins at home with parents, guardians, and authority figures leading by example and providing support with education on nutrition, fitness, and health. **What Can Parents do to Protect Their Children?** These are things that you must change, whether or not your kids are overweight, unless you want them to become overweight adults. You don't have to make drastic, all at once diet and lifestyle changes which most people can't keep up with. On the other hand, if you don't do anything today, there is a good chance that nothing is going to change and your overweight kids will continue to become more overweight.

We are the stewards of our children's health, and the primary role models for their development of good eating and self-care habits that they will carry into adulthood. We also set the tone and feeling surrounding food preparation and meals. As our children interact with the larger world in daycare and school settings, they are influenced by what is provided and modeled to them. There is a growing movement to provide healthier school lunches, school gardening projects, cooking modules, and other ways of increasing awareness and providing healthy food modeling to students. Become active as a parent advocate in your child's school. Many resources exist on-line to support this growing movement. See [www.lunchlessons.org](http://www.lunchlessons.org) and numerous other related sites for information and support. As we embark on healthy meal planning and preparation, it is important to consider, not only food choices for our children, but the larger picture of where and how foods are grown, whether they are in season, imported or stored in a warehouse, canned, frozen, or fresh from the farm, from organic sources or conventionally grown. Many studies have been done world-wide on differences between organic and non-organic foods. These studies have shown that organic fruits and vegetables not only are free of pesticides, they have significantly more vitamins and minerals, particularly the protective antioxidants. Grass fed beef has been found to have less contamination with dangerous bacteria. In addition, organic dairy and meats are free of pesticide, hormone, and antibiotic residues. These types of chemicals, which tend to be fat soluble, are stored in the fat of animals, which is then consumed in meat and dairy products. The toxins are then stored in our children's tissues and accumulate as they grow older. They can also be passed to our infants in breast milk. Some toxins are hormone mimics, and may disrupt the hormone balance of our growing children. Buying organic whenever possible protects our children from accumulating toxins and provides more vitamins and minerals than conventionally grown foods. Please refer to the Organic Trade Association website, [www.ota.com](http://www.ota.com) for specific studies on organic vs. conventionally grown foods. Also view the Pesticide Education Center website for more information and ways to reduce pesticide exposure in your home environment as well as your food consumption.

**Tips for Wise Shopping and Healthier Food Choices:** Shop the "outside ring" of the supermarket. There you will find fresh produce, meats and dairy. Vary your fare, picking different fruits and vegetables, looking for color, variety and freshness. Color correlates with nutrient value. Add colored berries, yellow and orange vegetables, and leafy greens to your choices.

Become a "label reader". Ingredients are listed in order of quantity. Avoid "partially hydrogenated" fats, corn syrup, white flour, white sugar, chemicals, preservatives and additives.

Buy organic as much as possible; choose fruits and vegetables in season.

Include the many varieties of beans, and organic nuts and seeds, providing alternate sources of protein, healthy fats, vitamins and minerals to your child's diet, and reducing overdependence on animal products with their higher saturated fat and cholesterol content.

Familiarize yourself with the Glycemic Index, a rating of foods according to how fast they turn into sugar in the body. Refer to [www.glycemicindex.com](http://www.glycemicindex.com) for a detailed list of values. Eating at 55 or lower on the index provides food choices that keep blood sugar more level. The goal is to keep blood sugar levels from spiking up and down during

the day, which creates a pattern that can lead to insulin resistance, obesity, Type II diabetes, and cravings for “empty calorie” high sugar foods.

Provide sources of protein at each meal. Primary protein sources include nuts, seeds, beans, meats, fish, dairy products, eggs. This provides a good foundation for maintaining level blood sugar between meals and reduces cravings for “empty” or nutrient poor high calorie snacks.

Make sure your children have a good breakfast. Breakfast sets the tone for the day; don't let your children run out the door and skip this important meal. Avoid cereals with processed grains and sweeteners. Adding a few raisins is a good way to sweeten whole grain cereal and provide extra nutrients. Eggs, yogurt or cottage cheese, or a “smoothy” with some protein powder, berries and yogurt can be a quick and healthful addition to breakfast.

Use healthy fats and oils. Coconut oil is healthy and heat stable, a good choice for use in cooking. Olive oil is also a very healthy choice. Avoid overuse of vegetable oils. Avoid fried foods including chips.

Include fish in your menu choices, which is an excellent source of vital Omega-3 oils essential for brain development. Good sources are Wild Alaskan salmon and sardines. Avoid farmed fish, and large fatty fish, as the mercury content can be high. Toxic metals and pesticides are stored in fat. The smaller the fish, the lower the toxin level. Tuna can contain significant amounts of mercury, so choose the smaller types of tuna, such as yellow fin.

Ask your grocer or look online for low mercury sources of fish. Giving your child fish oil, krill oil, or algae-derived oil capsules, with guaranteed mercury free labeling, can provide the important oils without concern for the toxin content of commercial fish.

Create a relaxed, humorous, intimate family time around at least one meal of the day. Slowing down, sharing family time without argument or tension, laughing together and enjoying good food is a great gift to your children and your family during this day and age of overly busy lives.

Invest in a high speed Vitamix or blender. It's easy to create healthful smoothies, and delicious frozen fruit “ice-cream” as an in-between meal snack or healthful desert. You can “hide” healthy “booster” foods like rice protein powder, flax seeds and flax oil, sunflower seeds, lecithin, and “green powders”, that make a smoothy into a powerhouse of healthy nutrients for your children.

Have healthy snacks available. Fresh fruit, nuts and seeds, trail mix, humus with vegetable sticks, air popped pop corn, raisins and dried figs, apples and almond butter all provide tasty alternatives to chips and cookies.

Encourage consumption of whole fruits, avoiding fruit juices with their high sugar content.

Make one day a week a “treat day”. Have a family outing to the ice cream parlor, or serve a special desert. This sets a pattern of having these types of delicious but “empty calorie” foods not as the daily fare, but included in the context of healthy eating and celebration. Rather than depriving your children of enjoyment, you are creating a habit of putting these types of food in a healthy context, rather than having them always available for casual eating on a daily basis. It is what you and your children eat 90% of the time that really makes a difference in their health.

Encourage daily physical activity for yourself and your children.

Watch for food reactions. Food allergies and sensitivities are common in children and may manifest in various symptoms, from an obvious anaphylactic reaction, (sudden difficulty breathing-which is life-threatening), to subtler symptoms including rashes, elevated heart rate, diarrhea or constipation, irritability or hyperactivity, or headaches. Sensitivities are common to such foods as: peanuts, wheat and other gluten containing grains such as barley, rye, oats (often found as an additive in many pre-prepared foods— read labels!), dairy, soy, egg, shellfish, strawberries and others. Sometimes symptoms may not become evident for a day or two following ingestion of an offending food. Try eliminating a suspected food for a week and adding back while watching for symptoms. Ironically, often a food that one has a craving for is the very food one is sensitive to. An integrative medical practitioner can provide testing and guidance in uncovering food sensitivities, which can make a tremendous difference in your child's health.

- Make sure your child gets an adequate supply of the basic components that make up a healthy diet.

The American Heart Association recommends this eating pattern for families:

- Energy (calories) should be adequate to support growth and development and to reach or maintain desirable body weight.

- Eat foods low in saturated fat, trans fat, cholesterol, salt (sodium), and added sugars.

- Keep total fat intake between 30 to 35 percent of calories for children 2 to 3 years of age and between 25 to 35 percent of calories for children and adolescents 4 to 18 years of age, with most fats coming from sources of polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fatty acids, such as fish, nuts and vegetable oils.

- Choose a variety of foods to get enough carbohydrates, protein and other nutrients.

- Eat only enough calories to maintain a healthy weight for your height and build. Be physically active for at least 60 minutes a day.

- Serve whole-grain breads and cereals rather than refined grain products. Look for “whole grain” as the first ingredient on the food label and make at least half your grain servings whole grain. Recommended grain intake ranges from 2 oz./day for a one-year-old to 7 oz./day for a 14–18-year-old boy.

- Serve a variety of fruits and vegetables daily, while limiting juice intake. Each meal should contain at least 1 fruit or vegetable. Children's recommended fruit intake ranges from 1 cup/day, between ages 1 and 3, to 2 cups for a 14–18-year-old boy. Recommended vegetable intake ranges from ¾ cup a day at age one to 3 cups for a 14–18-year-old boy.

- Introduce and regularly serve fish as an entrée. Avoid commercially fried fish.

- Serve nonfat and low-fat dairy foods. From ages 1–8, children need 2 cups of milk or its equivalent each day. Children ages 9–18 need 3 cups.

- Don't overfeed. Estimated calories needed by children range from 900/day for a 1-year-old to 1,800 for a 14–18-year-old girl and 2,200 for a 14–18-year-old boy.

This eating pattern supports a child's normal growth and development. It provides enough total energy and meets or exceeds the recommended daily allowances for all nutrients for children and adolescents, including iron and calcium.

As parents we will find as we adjust the diets of our children that the results will be reflected in all other aspects of the child as well, self-esteem will improve, energy levels will increase, sleep will improve and health will be optimized. It is imperative that we work to actively function as our children's advocates, helping them to develop healthy eating habits that will last a lifetime. The work we do with our children will continue to unfold in their good health as well as the future health of our grandchildren. Isaac Eliaz, M.D., M.S., L.Ac. Isaac Eliaz, M.D., M.S., L.Ac., is a pioneer in the field of integrative medicine, and a respected author, researcher, clinical practitioner, and frequent guest lecturer on integrative medical approaches to health, cancer prevention and treatment. He is an active researcher who has published several clinical studies in peer-reviewed journals.