



By  
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Last year, as part of the WATCH (Weight, Activity, Tobacco, Cholesterol, and High blood pressure) week, I had the pleasure of addressing hundreds of children from several schools in the Fort Bend district. What really gripped my attention was that more than 40% of the kids, by my simple observation, were overweight.

### *What causes childhood obesity?*

Childhood obesity is very prevalent and a serious health problem. It is most strikingly related to two key factors namely, high-calorie diet and lack of exercise. Genetic predisposition also plays a minor role. In rare conditions, it could be related to an adrenal problem called, Cushing's Syndrome where there is excess production of steroids. Some children may indulge in excess calorie intake to counteract boredom or emotional problems. Poverty and obesity go hand in hand, reflecting the lack of knowledge, time, or resources to address such issues, when their parents are more concerned about working two jobs and maintaining their livelihood.

### *Do children need extra calories?*

No doubt, children need more nutrients and calories to support their growth and development. But, when calorie intake from excess

carbohydrates and fats exceeds their growth needs, these empty calories turn into fat. That leads to obesity which becomes a permanent part of their life, unless they burn those calories in the form of exercise.

### *How do you determine if a child is overweight or obese?*

We should not brand all children as obese just based on their weight. Some children may have a large body (boney) frame and carry a few extra pounds to support their frame. Check with your healthcare provider to determine if your child has excess body fat and unhealthy weight.

The healthcare providers evaluate a child's weight in the context of child's development, height, and family history. They determine the body mass index (BMI). Based on the BMI, the children are grouped into small frame, medium frame, or large frame. If your child has a BMI that is in the 85<sup>th</sup> to 94<sup>th</sup> percentile for the age group, it is considered overweight. If the BMI is more than 95<sup>th</sup> percentile, it is considered obese.

### *How do you diagnose obesity?*

Just telling a child that he or she is overweight or obese is not good enough. As mentioned above, a complete childhood history, family background, activity, and eating habits have to be taken into account. Test must be done to rule out any hormonal problems related to adrenal or thyroid gland. We should also look for diabetes.

### *What are the complications related to overweight and obesity?*

Obesity can lead to a number of complications which can have serious long term implications. These

complications could be physical emotional, and social.

The physical problems could include childhood diabetes, hypertension, and high cholesterol. Obese children have an increased tendency for asthma, respiratory & skin infections, and liver disease.

The emotional problems may include low self-esteem and increased anxiety. Downbeat comments from other children can have a negative impact on their morale and temper. These could lead to isolation and depression.

Social problems may arise due to how you are viewed by your friends and how you respond to their comments.

### *What are the treatment options for obesity?*

Obesity leads to a number of complications, unless it is addressed at the beginning. Hence, parental education and knowledge regarding childhood obesity should be an integral part of obesity management. It has to be team work among the parents, the school system where children spend most their time, children, and the society.

**Children's Role:** The children need education on obesity and overweight. They also need education on calorie count and exercise. For example, a can of soda has 150 calories, all of which come from carbohydrates. In addition, it has 60 to 80 mg of caffeine. If you are drinking 4 cans of soda per day, you are getting 600 calories just from the soft drinks. Do you know how many calories you burn every minute? To sustain life, your body burns 4 calories per minute. If you jog at a speed of 4 miles per hour, your body burns 10 calories per minute. That means you have to jog for 60 minutes or one hour at 4 mile per hour in

## Childhood Obesity—Everyone's problem!

order to burn those 600 calories that you consume from your soft drinks alone. If you are not able to burn off those calories on a daily basis, the best thing to do is not to consume those calories to begin with. Also keep in mind that you are getting an enormous amount of caffeine from those multiple drinks.

Pay attention to those snacks such as potato chips, fries, and cheetos etc. One ounce of each has 150-240 calories, most of which come from carbohydrates and fats. Those calories add to your obesity. You must think twice before you shout out for a large order of a hamburger, large fries, and 32 ounce drink. You may be loading your system with 300 to 400 calories for a burger, 300-400 calories for an order of large fries, and another 400-500 calories from the soft drink. Not bad, just over 1000 calories for a routine lunch. Then, if you go home and gulp a few servings of ice cream, you need help, and so do your parents.

**Presents' Role:** Our children model after us. What we eat and drink influences what our children do. First, we need to educate ourselves on the childhood obesity problem. Next, we need some strict guidelines for ourselves so that we set a good example for our children. Next, focus on what you fill up your refrigerators and pantries with. Then keep an eye on the quality and more importantly the quantity of food consumed by your children. Finally, minimize the number of snacks available in the house.

Parents need to take control of their children's activities. If left to the children, they would rather sit and watch TV until dawn. It is up to the parents to take a more proactive role in getting the children involved in physical activities. That means the parents have to enroll their children in

physical activities and take them to those activities. Parents should get involved in physical activities around the house in an effort to encourage the children to take part. Do not use food as a reward or punishment to your children. Do not try to stop your old habits suddenly. Try to replace item by item, the junk foods with healthy choices such as fruits, vegetables, over time so that your children will have time to get acclimatized to a healthier lifestyle. This also will help you to get adjusted so that you do not relapse back into those old habits.

**Society's Role:** Childhood obesity is everyone's problem and the society has more responsibility than a child who is obese! Childhood obesity is a barometer of how we, as a society, are raising our children. The schools, the food industry, and the government have a major role in what we feed our children during the lunch hours. It is encouraging to see that the amount of calories shipped to the schools in the form of soft drinks has decreased by more than 50% over the past several years. Just as the government has imposed EPA standards for emissions to safeguard the air we breathe, there should be more stringent standards enforced regarding the quality of food that is served to the children at the schools. The food the children consume should as important as the air they breathe.

**Disclaimer:** The Information provided here is for educational purpose only. Please consult with your physician for any medical advice.

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