



STARTING YOUNG

IT'S NOW CONSIDERED THE BEST WAY TO FIGHT OUR GROWING OBESITY PROBLEM

Hit the rewind button. Thirty years ago, American society hadn't yet traded the playground for the computer screen, adopted a diet chock full of fast food or learned to say "supersize it."

Recognizing what's changed since those slimmer days is an important step in reshaping the future. Faced with a generation of Americans whose weighty problems are starting to strain the medical system, health care experts are launching a society-wide effort to bring back such things as longer recess, safer playgrounds, walkable sidewalks and healthier school lunches. The primary focus of their efforts: It's kids.

Why kids? For one thing, they are more adaptable. Establish good nutrition and exercise habits when they're young, and chances are good that those healthy behaviors will stick. "There is no question that obesity is very difficult to treat once it develops," says Dr. Stephen R. Daniels, professor of pediatrics and environmental health at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. "Starting earlier gives us a better shot."

Research shows, for example, that kids who participate in some kind of obesity programming can do very well. "In fact, they do much better than their adult counterparts," says pediatrician Lorna Friedman, senior medical executive at CIGNA. That's the good news, she says.

The bad news: Some 15% of children are currently considered obese. That compares to the early 1970s when obesity rates were closer to 5%. In some populations, the

current numbers are even higher. In New Jersey, a full 20% of sixth graders are obese, and another 18% are overweight.

Translate those statistics into health problems, doctors say, and the trend is even scarier. "We are starting to see health outcomes in children that had previously only been seen in adults," says Dr. Jeffrey P. Koplan, vice president for academic health affairs at Emory University and chairman of the committee that authored the Institute of Medicine's new report "Preventing Childhood Obesity." Type II diabetes, once virtually unknown in children, is a prime example, he says. "What previously could be tossed off as aesthetic now is being seen for what it really is—a serious risk factor for disease."

Establish good nutrition and exercise habits when they're young, and chances are good that those healthy behaviors will stick.

There are other costs as well. Obese children are more likely to suffer from low self-esteem and depression. And as they grow up, there's a 70% chance that they will stay obese. Indeed, the rise of obesity, unhealthy eating habits and physical inactivity has prompted the U.S. Surgeon General to warn that we may see the first generation with a "shorter lifespan than their parents."

According to a Rand Corp. study, obese people spend 36% more on health care services and 77% more on medications. Other studies set the national health care cost of obesity and overweight in adults at between

\$98 billion and \$129 billion a year. "That's nowhere near the full impact of the obesity epidemic," says Koplan. Even if obesity rates level off, costs will continue to rise as today's obese children become adults.

Finger pointing is counterproductive. "It's not one group's fault or responsibility," says nutritionist and dietician Vickie James of Healthy Kids Challenge, a non-profit organization that's taking its emphasis on fitness and nutrition to the schools. "It is everyone taking simple, small steps together."

These simple steps, however, add up to a major overhaul of some deeply entrenched aspects of American life and business. The new Institute of Medicine report has thrown down the gauntlet, calling for major change

in everything from what's put in the school vending machines to what's put on the television screen. Likened by some to the surgeon general's initial report on smoking, the report makes far-reaching recommendations on issues as diverse as local zoning ordinances, health plan incentives, media advertising and the family television.

By focusing on kids, these experts also hope to create a ripple effect. "There are very few people in this country who aren't connected to a child," explains James. By mobilizing society to focus on kids, she says, the message gets delivered to everyone.



Carrots don't come in nacho cheese flavor. So it's no surprise kids are more willing to sit down with a bag of chips than eat something nutritious. Unfortunately, such habits tend to grow with kids into adulthood where obesity can cause serious physical and emotional problems. At CIGNA® we realize obesity can affect the home as well as the workplace. With the Healthy Kids Challenge we're working with families and physicians alike on the importance of eating healthy and exercising at a young age. After all, playtime is just as important when you're an adult. For more information on CIGNA employee benefits, ask your employee benefits manager or visit us at www.cigna.com.



CIGNA is a proud national sponsor of the Healthy Kids Challenge.



CIGNA

A Business of Caring.