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Strategies To Reverse The Obesity Crisis

by Trina Wiggins

Will the headlines of 2005 read, "Obesity has surpassed smoking as the #1 preventable cause of death"? It is now recognized that the number of overfed people in the world are just as prevalent as those who are underfed. We are currently in the midst of an obesity crisis, not only with adults, but also with our young people. So what exactly is obesity?

Obesity is defined by utilizing BMI, or Body Mass Index. It is a measure of body weight in relation to height. The definition of obesity in adults according to the BMI is anything greater than 30. The normal range of BMI is between 18.5 and 24.9. You are overweight at a BMI of 25. There are four classes of obesity: pre-obese class ranges from 25 to 29.9; obese class 1 from 30 to 34.9; obese class 2 from 35 to 39.9; and obese class 3 greater than 40. The determination of obesity in children is different from adults and it is calculated using a formula based on weight and height. The formula is:

$$\text{Wt (pounds)} \div \text{height (inches)} = \text{height (inches)} \times 703$$

Once you calculate your BMI, you then can plot your BMI on a BMI for age percentile chart. Obesity for children is defined as a BMI greater than the 95%. If your child's BMI is between the

85% and 95%, then he or she is at risk for obesity. Thirty percent of school-age children are overweight and 15% are obese. Fifty percent of obese children over the age of six become obese adults. Seventy to eighty percent of obese adolescents become obese adults. Among young children, the strongest predictor of adulthood obesity was parental obesity. If one parent is obese, the risk of the child becoming obese increased threefold. If both parents are obese, the risk of the child becoming obese increased 13-fold.

Why are our children obese? Although obesity has some genetic basis, there are two key environmental components which have been attributed to our obesity crisis. Poor dietary habits and decreased physical activity are the two primary reasons. Today's children are the most inactive generation in the history of America. Current statistics reveal that only 50% of children engage in physical activity on a regular basis. Twenty-five percent of young people report engaging in light to moderate activity such as walking and biking. Fourteen percent report that they do absolutely no physical activity at all. Physical activity has decreased for many reasons. There are fewer children that walk or ride a bike anymore. Instead, they are driven in a car to get from point A to point B. Children are spending less time outdoors exploring and playing because parents are concerned for their safety. School districts have cut back on physical education classes. With the advent of

		Body Mass Index Table																																							
		Normal					Overweight					Obese					Extreme Obesity																								
BMI	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	49	50	51	52	53	54				
Height (feet)	Body Weight (pounds)																																								
58	91	96	100	105	110	115	120	125	130	135	140	145	150	155	160	165	170	175	180	185	190	195	200	205	210	215	220	225	230	235	240	245	250	255	260	265	270				
59	94	99	104	109	114	119	124	129	134	139	144	149	154	159	164	169	174	179	184	189	194	199	204	209	214	219	224	229	234	239	244	249	254	259	264	269	274	279			
60	97	102	107	112	117	122	127	132	137	142	147	152	157	162	167	172	177	182	187	192	197	202	207	212	217	222	227	232	237	242	247	252	257	262	267	272	277	282	287		
61	100	106	111	116	121	126	131	136	141	146	151	156	161	166	171	176	181	186	191	196	201	206	211	216	221	226	231	236	241	246	251	256	261	266	271	276	281	286	291		
62	104	108	113	118	123	128	133	138	143	148	153	158	163	168	173	178	183	188	193	198	203	208	213	218	223	228	233	238	243	248	253	258	263	268	273	278	283	288	293		
63	107	113	118	124	130	135	141	146	151	156	161	166	171	176	181	186	191	196	201	206	211	216	221	226	231	236	241	246	251	256	261	266	271	276	281	286	291	296	301		
64	110	116	122	128	134	140	145	151	156	161	166	171	176	181	186	191	196	201	206	211	216	221	226	231	236	241	246	251	256	261	266	271	276	281	286	291	296	301	306	311	
65	114	120	126	132	138	144	150	156	162	168	174	180	186	192	198	204	210	216	222	228	234	240	246	252	258	264	270	276	282	288	294	300	306	312	318	324	330	336	342		
66	118	124	130	136	142	148	154	160	166	172	178	184	190	196	202	208	214	220	226	232	238	244	250	256	262	268	274	280	286	292	298	304	310	316	322	328	334	340	346	352	
67	121	127	134	140	146	152	158	164	170	176	182	188	194	200	206	212	218	224	230	236	242	248	254	260	266	272	278	284	290	296	302	308	314	320	326	332	338	344	350	356	
68	125	131	138	144	151	158	164	171	177	184	190	197	203	210	216	223	229	236	242	249	255	262	268	275	281	288	294	301	308	314	321	327	334	340	347	353	360	366	372	379	
69	128	135	142	149	156	163	170	176	183	190	197	204	211	218	225	232	239	246	253	260	267	274	281	288	295	302	309	316	323	330	337	344	351	358	365	372	379	386	393	400	
70	132	139	146	153	160	167	174	181	188	195	202	209	216	223	230	237	244	251	258	265	272	279	286	293	300	307	314	321	328	335	342	349	356	363	370	377	384	391	398	405	
71	136	143	150	157	164	171	178	185	192	199	206	213	220	227	234	241	248	255	262	269	276	283	290	297	304	311	318	325	332	339	346	353	360	367	374	381	388	395	402	409	
72	140	147	154	161	168	175	182	189	196	203	210	217	224	231	238	245	252	259	266	273	280	287	294	301	308	315	322	329	336	343	350	357	364	371	378	385	392	399	406	413	
73	144	151	158	165	172	179	186	193	200	207	214	221	228	235	242	249	256	263	270	277	284	291	298	305	312	319	326	333	340	347	354	361	368	375	382	389	396	403	410	417	
74	148	155	162	169	176	183	190	197	204	211	218	225	232	239	246	253	260	267	274	281	288	295	302	309	316	323	330	337	344	351	358	365	372	379	386	393	400	407	414	421	428
75	152	159	166	173	180	187	194	201	208	215	222	229	236	243	250	257	264	271	278	285	292	299	306	313	320	327	334	341	348	355	362	369	376	383	390	397	404	411	418	425	432
76	156	163	170	177	184	191	198	205	212	219	226	233	240	247	254	261	268	275	282	289	296	303	310	317	324	331	338	345	352	359	366	373	380	387	394	401	408	415	422	429	
77	160	167	174	181	188	195	202	209	216	223	230	237	244	251	258	265	272	279	286	293	300	307	314	321	328	335	342	349	356	363	370	377	384	391	398	405	412	419	426	433	

Source: Adapted from Clinical Guidelines on the Identification, Evaluation, and Treatment of Overweight and Obesity in Adults: The Evidence Report.

Trina Wiggins – Wife, Mother, Respected Physician, Fitness Competitor



Trina has been a practicing pediatrician for 17 years. She is married to Dr. Carl Allen, an OB/GYN. They are the proud parents of 9-1/2 year old twin boys. Trina currently educates her patients, their parents and others in her community about achieving a healthier lifestyle through speaking at churches, Boys & Girls Clubs, and YMCA's. Her goals include reducing the incidence of childhood obesity and plans to open her own fitness camp for overweight kids.

computers, video games, and television, children are less likely to be active. Current studies looking at the association of TV viewing and obesity are striking. The more time spent watching TV, the greater chance the child has for becoming overweight. While watching TV, children are expending very little energy. They are also more likely to have junk food while watching TV. It is estimated that our young people spend an average of three hours a day watching TV, and this does not include computer or video-game use.

The second environmental factor is poor dietary habits. It is estimated that only 30% of children are meeting their goals of dietary intake of meats, fruits and vegetables. Fats and sugars account for greater than 40% of our young people's energy intake. When our children eat vegetables, white potatoes in the form of potato chips and French fries accounted for 50% of the vegetable intake in a 1996 survey. Additional foods that are culprits are sugar-filled drinks, sodas, and fast foods. The number of meals eaten away from home has increased tremendously. Fast foods usually are higher in calories with large amounts of fat and little nutritional value. Fast food meals are often times super-sized, so portions are much larger. French fries and sodas have increased two to five times greater than 30 years ago. Some of our children skip breakfast, and this has been associated with pediatric obesity. Eating a healthy breakfast may reduce fat intake and snacking throughout the day.

So why should we be concerned with childhood obesity? There

are severe health consequences our children will face if we don't address this problem with a sense of urgency. The ultimate price our children will face is premature death. Obese children are at increased risk for developing cardiovascular disease (hypertension, elevated cholesterol and lipids), diabetes, orthopedic problems, emotional and psychological disturbances. Living with these chronic diseases sentence our children to a life filled with frequent doctor visits and multiple medication usage. If we don't reverse this epidemic, our health costs will be astronomical.

What are some simple strategies and solutions?

- (1) You, as the parent, should lead by example. Parents have the greatest influence on their children. Parents must eat healthy and exercise on a daily basis.
- (2) Offer many healthy foods and snack choices (i.e., fruit, sliced vegetables) in place of junk food.
- (3) Limit soda and sugary drinks such as fruit punches and sports drinks. Serve skim milk and water instead.
- (4) Limit fast food and low-nutrient snacks such as candy and potato chips.

Studies show that the amount of nutritional education incorporated in the school curriculum directly correlates with positive behavioral changes in diet.

- (5)** Eat meals together as a family at home.
- (6)** Learn to read food labels to make healthier food selection.
- (7)** Be aware of choosing proper portion size. Extra large servings can contribute to weight gain.
- (8)** Never use food for comfort, punishment or reward.
- (9)** Don't force kids to eat everything on their plate.
- (10)** Encourage kids to eat slowly and only when hungry.
- (11)** Serve meals in stages. Try beginning with fruits and vegetables; then serve the main entrée. Aim for five servings of fruit and vegetables daily.
- (12)** Don't overly restrict food because kids may feel deprived and become obsessed with food.
- (13)** Limit television, computer, and video time to no more than one hour per day (not including homework-related use).
- (14)** Do not put a TV in your kid's bedroom.
- (15)** Allow and encourage time to play outdoors.
- (16)** Take a good look at the family's fitness level.
- (17)** Do the adults exercise? Take walks and bike rides together as a family after dinner. Increase quality family time.
- (18)** Speak with your child about different sports or activities he or she enjoys. Try new activities.

(19) Consider getting everyone in the family a pedometer to keep tabs on how many steps each family member takes per day: 10,000 steps = 4 miles, which will maintain your current weight; 12,000 steps/day will allow for weight loss. Play games and give prizes or rewards to the family member with the most steps taken at the end of the week.

(20) Make physical activity fun. Don't look at it as exercise, but as increased movement.

Whether it is brisk walking in the park, hiking, hula dancing, hip-hop dancing, kickball, dodge ball - just get moving! Young people should participate in 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily.

A family's involvement is crucial for a child's success in overcoming obesity. In addition to the family's involvement, obesity prevention can be managed through school and community programs. Our children spend more time at school than at home. Therefore, changes in the school system's approach to nutrition and exercise needs to be addressed.

Studies show that the amount of nutritional education incorporated in the school curriculum directly correlates with positive behavioral changes in diet. We need to increase the amount of time educating our youth on proper diet and nutrition. School meals should meet the American Dietetic Association recommendations to provide low-fat, well-balanced nutritious meals. School campuses should remove vending machines loaded with junk and replace them with healthy snacks, such as fresh fruit, low-fat cheese and crackers, applesauce, graham crackers, baked tortilla chips, low-fat yogurt, air-popped popcorn, dried fruit, and sugar-free chocolate pudding.

Schools should provide daily physical education for all students. There should also be extracurricular physical activity programs (such as hip-hop dance, yoga, pilates, hiking) with an emphasis on participation and having fun. The goal is to get everyone moving. The parks and recreation departments and community centers are also excellent venues for obesity prevention programs. These venues can increase physical fitness among our children. Programs through these facilities should be diverse. Competitive youth sports are an obvious outlet for some children. However, every child may not be athletic and could possibly be intimidated by organized sports. These children are less active and are more likely to be overweight. There needs to be non-competitive fun activities that get all kids moving. Dancing, obstacle courses, and relays are just a few examples.

As consumers, we need to challenge our schools to provide our children with healthy meals. Make sure your school is following the American Dietetic Association guidelines for nutritious lunch meals. These guidelines can be found under www.eatright.org. Get your local pediatrician involved by either speaking or writing a letter to the school board informing them of the increased diseases he or she is seeing as a result of obesity. If everyone takes a stand and becomes involved with helping our children at any level, we can reverse this epidemic.