



A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

Overcoming Obesity

Obesity in K–8 Students — New York City, 2006–07 and 2010–11 School Years

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[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Dr. Gaynes] Welcome to *A Cup of Health with CDC*, a weekly feature of the *MMWR*, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm your host, Dr. Robert Gaynes.

Obesity is a major public health problem in the United States. Being obese or overweight at an early age increases the risk for developing chronic illnesses, including heart disease, diabetes, and some cancers.

Magdalena Berger is a researcher with the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. She's joining us by phone today to discuss the dangers of childhood obesity. Welcome to the show, Magda.

[Ms. Berger] Thanks for having me.

[Dr. Gaynes] Magda, how is obesity actually defined?

[Ms. Berger] For both children and adults, obesity is defined using a measure called BMI, and BMI stands for 'Body Mass Index.' And it's a way of measuring excess weight after accounting for a person's height. In adults, anyone who has a BMI of between 18 and 25 is considered to be normal weight. Anyone who has a BMI between 25 and 30 is considered to be overweight and anyone who has a BMI of over 30 is considered to be obese.

For children, it's slightly more complicated because children's bodies change so much as they grow, and so, for children, obesity is defined as having a BMI at or above the 95th percentile for their specific age and gender. But for both adults and for children, what obesity indicates is a dangerous of excess body weight after accounting for the person's height.

[Dr. Gaynes] How big of a problem is obesity?

[Ms. Berger] For both children and adults, obesity is a very big problem, both nationally and in New York City. And in New York City, we've just had some good news which is that we found that among children, obesity has declined slightly in the past five years, but it's still a very large problem, so among children who are in grades K through eight in public school in New York City, there are still one in five children who are obese and therefore, it's still a very big public health problem.

[Dr. Gaynes] Well, what are the main causes of obesity?

[Ms. Berger] The main causes of obesity are eating too much high calorie food and not getting enough exercise. That's really as simple as it is. If you eat less and exercise more, you're less likely to be obese.

[Dr. Gaynes] What health problems can result from a child being obese?

[Ms. Berger] Children who are obese are more likely to have high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and high blood sugar levels and those are all risk factors for heart disease. Children who are obese can also have high rates of asthma and other breathing problems, and then obese children can also have problems that are more difficult to measure but are just as important, so they can have psychological and social problems, such as being rejected by their peers, depression, and poor self-esteem. And then, maybe most importantly, obese children are at very high risk of becoming obese adults, and continuing to have these problems throughout their lives.

[Dr. Gaynes] What are some strategies for overcoming obesity and maintaining a healthy weight?

[Ms. Berger] The best way that parents can help their children maintain a healthy weight is by setting a good example at home. What that means is that parents should be eating well, which means lots of fresh vegetables and fruit, limiting the amount of sugary drinks and high calorie foods that they eat. Parents should also be getting lots of exercise and limiting the amount of time they spend in front of the TV and computer. And if parents can adopt these healthy patterns, then children are likely to follow by example. And then, parents can also get involved on another level; they can contact their local school and try and to improve the food that is served to their children during lunch and also the food that is available to their children at vending machines.

It's important for children to get the same messages about healthy food and exercise, both at school and at home.

[Dr. Gaynes] Where can listeners get more information about overcoming obesity?

[Ms. Berger] CDC has a great website that explains how BMI is calculated for both children and for adults and has specific recommendations about what parents can do to help their children maintain a healthy weight; and the website is www.cdc.gov/healthyweight/children.

[Dr. Gaynes] Thanks, Magda. I've been talking today with Magdalena Berger of the New City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene about the dangers of childhood obesity.

Remember, whether at home or school, children should be encouraged to eat lots of fruits and vegetables and be physically active. Parents can help by being good role models for these behaviors and can advocate for healthy food choices at school.

Until next time, be well. This is Dr. Robert Gaynes for *A Cup of Health with CDC*.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO.