

Obesity epidemic is endangering our kids

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A recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lowered the estimate of the annual number of deaths that can be attributed to overweight and obesity. The Center for Consumer Freedom (with backing from undisclosed sources) quickly responded with full-page newspaper ads dismissing the notion of an obesity epidemic as "hype." This is a myopic and dangerous stance, particularly where our children are concerned.

Would those who lobby for "consumer freedom" argue that there's an acceptable number of preventable deaths? Should we wait until we pass some magic mortality number to take action that could save the next generation from disease and disability? Of course not. It's clear we must act now to protect our children and prevent a public health tragedy.

While the estimate of deaths attributable to overweight and obesity may have been revised -- in part, because of better treatment -- two facts remain unchanged and alarming: 1) we're raising the most overweight generation of children in the nation's history, and 2) that's contributing to the earlier onset of chronic disease. To ignore these facts is to gamble with the lives of our children. That's a bet we can't be willing to take.

Over the past three decades, obesity rates have more than doubled among kids ages 2 to 5 and more than tripled among those ages 6 to 11. These increases leave no doubt that we are, indeed, facing an epidemic. Today, about 9 million children over the age of 6 are considered obese.

Health experts estimate that obese adolescents have up to an 80 percent chance of becoming overweight or obese adults. And, with the onset of obesity starting earlier, we're already seeing the earlier onset of serious, chronic illnesses that require treatment. While the health of our children should be our primary concern, this situation also poses a serious economic challenge.

In 2000, total costs related to obesity were about \$117 billion. Our families, employers and our health care system already are struggling under the weight of these costs. If rates of childhood obesity continue to increase at such an alarming pace, our public and private treasuries will collapse under the burden of providing medical care to this generation.

When I was in medical school, we used to call Type 2 diabetes "adult onset diabetes" because it occurred only in adults. Not any more. Today it's one of several "grown-up" conditions increasingly diagnosed in overweight kids. A host of other health problems awaits these children as they grow up, including heart disease, stroke and cancer.

Our most vulnerable children are at greatest risk. Low-income African-American, Hispanic and Native American kids experience much higher rates of obesity than their more affluent peers. It's not surprising, when you consider that many of these children live in neighborhoods that don't offer access to affordable healthy foods or safe places to play and exercise.

How can kids, and their parents, make healthy choices when they don't have healthy options available? We must create environments that make it easy for children and their parents to eat well and be more active.

We're already seeing some promising efforts. For instance, Arkansas passed a law that eliminated vending machines in public elementary schools and required all public schools to measure each student's body mass index and report the confidential results to parents. It also required school districts to form advisory committees to determine the best ways to improve nutrition and physical activity in their schools.

We don't know yet how effective such steps will be in halting the increase in childhood obesity. But all we need to do is look around to see how badly we're failing our children with our current course of inaction.

When it comes to obesity, we truly face a public health threat of epidemic proportions. This is an area where we need to prevent illness, not merely treat it after the fact. Unless we change course, we may raise the first generation of American kids who will live sicker and die younger than the generation before them. That's something our society can't afford and must not accept. And that's no hype.

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