

Obesity & Malnutrition

What's the connection?

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As a health educator, and mother, I know how difficult it can be sometimes to make sure our families, especially our kids, are getting the nutrients they need to keep their bodies and minds healthy and fit. We live in a very toxic food environment, where we are consuming too much of the wrong foods, larger portions, (BEEN SUPERSIZING FOR TOO LONG), and high consumption of fast foods, and processed foods. Our food choices are not only causing obesity rates to soar, but causing malnutrition among our children, and our society. This malnutrition affects their learning and behavior, as well.

For the purpose of this article, I will focus on the malnutrition side of obesity. However, I must also state that obesity has many contributing factors, including sedentary lifestyles, decreasing physical education programs in schools, and watching too much television. Obesity is described as 30% over your maximum weight desirable for your height.

Many people who are overweight or obese are actually malnourished; they are not eating the right foods. Obesity is one of the most pressing health problems facing the country. For example, diseases that were once associated with the elderly are now being diagnosed by pediatricians. Diseases such as Type II diabetes, high blood pressure, atherosclerosis, high cholesterol, arthritis, etc are now seen in our children. Furthermore, 70 percent of our 12-year-olds have the beginning stages of hardening of the arteries! THE US SURGEON GENERAL STATED "THAT IF WE DON'T MAKE SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN OUR CURRENT DIETARY TRENDS, GENERATION "Y" (30 YEAR-OLDS AND YOUNGER) WILL OUT LIVE THEIR CHILDREN."

Over the last 20 years, obesity rates have doubled in adults, and tripled in adolescents. More than 65% of Americans are now overweight or obese. How did we get to be so huge, and how can we fix it?

First, we need to examine what we are eating. I have seen first-hand what kids are eating. Some kids come to school without eating breakfast, some are eating chips and drinking soda by their first break or recess. That's followed at lunch by nachos, corndogs, chicken fingers, hamburgers, or some other nutritionally-deficient item and washed down with more soda, or one of those artificially colored sports drinks. After-school treats include more soda, ice cream, cookies, mini-cakes, or more chips.

Secondly, we need to examine what's in the food they eat. And why is it making them sick and fat? Most bags of chips are carbohydrates deep-fried in partially hydrogenated oil (deadly trans fats!), and contain up to half of a child's fat content for the day. Sodas are basically sugar water that will suppress the immune system, and deplete calcium. And forget diet sodas all together! The

aspartame contained in diet sodas are known neurotoxins (that's our brains!) and the splenda is no better. If my clients don't quit the sodas, weight loss is a lot harder if at all. Diet sodas can actually cause you to gain weight.

Although the school system is attacking this problem, it still begins at home. We as parents have to take control and teach best choices and have them easily available for consumption. Schools have already incorporated salad bars, and fresh fruit, many still have contracts with fast food and soda companies that further contribute to our kids' poor diets. We place such high academic standards on our schools, why don't we place a higher value on what they are feeding our children?

Solutions

What can we do about it? Let's address our food choices. Again, remember that food is fuel, and it will either help or heal, or damage or kill...it's your choice. Some healthy nutrition tips are:

- Eat fresh raw fruits and vegetables at every meal. They contain many healing benefits provided by the thousands of phytonutrients. Fruits and veggies have fiber, which helps "move things" through our system. Most people who are obese are also constipated, which is another subject.
- Avoid soft drinks with sugar, high fructose corn syrup, and artificial colors, and flavors.
- Avoid diet foods and beverages.
- Drink plenty of clean filtered water. It transports nutrients, and cleanses the body. A good rule: drink half your body weight in ounces, i.e. if a child weighs 100 lbs., he/she should drink at least 50 ounces of water daily.
- Increase fiber intake by eating raw fruits, veggies, whole grains, nuts, beans and legumes.
- Avoid refined, enriched "whites"; i.e. flour, rice, pastas, breads, tortillas.
- Avoid partially hydrogenated oils (trans fats). They disrupt almost every organ function in the body, and clog our arteries.

Even though our food and beverage choices are very important, exercise is as well. As so many Americans have become "couch potatoes," our children have become "tater tots."

Being overweight is not only extremely unhealthy, it affects our self-esteem, and limits activities, which may exclude us from fun games on the playground, or riding a ride at an amusement park.

According to the New England Journal of Medicine, for every 40 pounds overweight you are, you increase your chances of:

- a heart attack by 360%
- cancer by 80%
- Type II diabetes by 2800%

- high blood pressure by 260%
- degenerative arthritis by 400%
- and dying by 110%

Obesity is an epidemic that is taxing our health care system and contributes to over 300,000 deaths annually, but it can be controlled. Choose wisely. When you buy food, anywhere, from the grocery store, to restaurants, to the school cafeteria, you are making not only financial choices within your family's budget, but you are more importantly making some nutritional choices that will affect your family's health, vitality and longevity.

Cheryl Lawrence is a Registered Dietitian and has been in private practice in Allen for the last 10 years. She counsels children, adolescents, adults, and pregnant moms to understand how to manage their food intake to make a happier healthier body. **You are what you eat, Are you what you want to be?**. Cheryl can be reached at 214-498-7637