

If you have been tuned in to any media source over the past few months (if not, years), you've heard of the alarming level of obesity in the United States. Obesity, which places one at risk for many health problems, is defined as an excess percentage of body weight due to fat.

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), 12% of Kansas high school students are obese based on the 2013 Youth Risk Behavior Survey. This is a very concerning statistic. Why? Because obesity leads to both immediate and long term health conditions that seriously compromise a person's well-being:

- Increased health risk factors for high blood pressure and/or high cholesterol
- Increased risk of prediabetes, in which blood glucose levels indicate a greater chance for developing diabetes
- Increased risk of being obese as an adult
- Increased risk of bone and joint problems
- Increased risk of psychological effects such as low self-esteem and being stigmatized
- Increased risk for many types of cancer as they get older

There are additional health risks linked to obesity including heart disease, stroke, type II diabetes, and osteoarthritis, to name a few. Many factors play a role in childhood obesity and the factors in combination can have even a stronger impact. Genetics, family environment, behavior, and socio-demographics influence a child's potential for becoming obese.

Research shows that *obesity tends to run in a family*. In some cases, the influence of parental obesity is greater than the child's weight alone. This indicates that there is a genetic link for obesity. Tip: If you know that obesity runs in your family, starting a healthy eating and activity plan earlier in life will help delay/prevent the onset of obesity.

As it relates to obesity, behavior is a combination of eating patterns and preferences, activity level, and sedentary (seat) time. Being stretched between activities and available time, *families have compromised their nutrition* - often relying heavily on high calorie convenience foods and fast food menus. These alternatives are usually limited to high fat and high carbohydrate options with very little (if any) fruit and vegetable options. Even though my own kids try to convince me that pickles count as vegetables since they are made from cucumbers, the sodium they contain far offsets any nutritional value they have. Nice try, kids! Half of every meal should be made up of fruits and vegetables – real ones.

Children are often faced with *limited opportunities to be physically active*. School physical education programs have been reduced and fewer children are walking to and from school or doing household chores on a regular basis. Lack of physical activity causes an imbalance in the body's use of calories. When our body takes in more calories than it burns, the end result is weight gain. This continued imbalance over time results in obesity.

Our American *lifestyles have become more and more sedentary*, which means we sit more than the generations before us. Sedentary activities, such as playing video games, watching TV, or computer screen time, has dramatically increased leading to less physical activity that burns off the calories taken in through the food we eat. Add to that the tendency we have for snacking during these sedentary activities and you can see why there is a strong link between obesity and time spent watching TV.

Our environment impacts our eating habits, and thus can contribute to childhood obesity. We learn from the eating patterns of our caregivers at a very young age. We tend to overlook the imprint we make on young children who observe and mimic how we eat and the quantity of food we consume. It is not uncommon to hear parents draw attention to the amount of food their children consume "You should see how much my kiddo can pack away!" Children perceive this as praise and perhaps think they are pleasing their parents when they over-consume.

There is good news, though. The CDC reported a decline in the overall obesity rates in Kansas, according to their 2013 data. Although the trend is going in a positive direction, families, schools, and other governmental agencies need to remain diligent in their efforts to maintain, if not accelerate this positive trend.

Schools, churches, and communities can also mold a child's eating pattern.

Our Kansas school food service programs are doing their part to help have greater access to healthful food choices. You might hear some rumblings from you school-aged children or grandchildren about their school meals and snacks this year. The changes that have been taking place in our school lunch programs have been occurring over the last few years in order to support better health for American children. What began with the school lunch and breakfast programs has now moved into additional food choices in our schools. USDA Smart Snacks regulations became effective July 1, 2014 in order to continue efforts in helping children make good snacking decisions.

Community and school-based nutrition education classroom programs are also working to keep the positive trend toward lower childhood obesity rates. One example of such efforts includes monthly nutrition classes offered through a collaborative effort of Geary

County Extension and the WIC program at the Geary County Health Department. Parents have the opportunity to learn more about selecting a preparing food that meets the nutritional needs of their family. The classes are paid for through a grant from the state Family Nutrition Program (FNP) K-State Research and Extension. This same grant also supports the efforts of programming in area 1st and 3rd grade classrooms. Children learn about basic nutrition, healthful food choices and sample a variety of healthy snacks. Contact Geary County Extension for more information about healthy family nutrition at 238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!