Tackling childhood obesity

Over 23 million teenagers and children in the United States are overweight or obese, a dramatic and disturbing statistic. Children who struggle with their weight are at risk for bullying and low self-esteem.

In addition, health professionals have found that obese and overweight children are susceptible to developing diseases that are typically seen in older adults, including Type 2 diabetes, joint pain and heart disease.

Addressing childhood obesity is difficult, and experts realize that there are a number of factors that contribute to the problem. These factors include access to healthy food, opportunities for exercise and physical activity, socioeconomic factors and the way families select, prepare and eat their meals and snacks.

Two areas in which schools and communities have made positive changes in children’s health have been in promoting healthy physical activity and dietary choices. Schools are instructing their cafeterias to offer healthier choices at breakfast and lunch and to restock vending machines with bottled water, fruit juices and nutritious snacks. Still, more work needs to be done. Not all children have access to healthy food at school, and some schools don’t offer physical education classes.

Parents play such an important role in helping their children stay healthy. When they learn about healthy food choices and exercise habits and put them into practice, the whole family benefits. For example, parents who learn to cook healthy meals have a huge impact on their children’s diets.

Many families have also discovered that they can have a lot of fun exercising together. Instead of driving, they choose to walk or bike their way around town. Extra physical activity can make a positive difference in their well being and in their relationship, too.

Healthy snacks kids can make themselves

When kids get hungry, they snack. Snacking can be a good way of getting the extra nutrients and calories that kids need, but unhealthy snacks can lead to weight gain and obesity.

Today, 25% of calories come from snacks, so choosing them thoughtfully is important. Keeping your fridge and cabinets stocked with healthy snacks makes it easier for children to say “no” to chips and candy and “yes” to nutritious, tasty, whole food options.

One way to get kids to be more mindful about what they eat is to include them in grocery shopping and food preparation. Make snacks a family affair. Let your children choose healthy snack ingredients at the store, and show them how to use these foods to prepare snacks that can be consumed right away or stored for on-the-go snacking later.

A sample shopping list of healthy snacks: carrots, celery, fresh fruit, nuts, nut butters (peanut, almond, sunflower seed, etc), whole grain crackers, baked tortilla chips, salsa, hummus, string cheese, whole wheat pita bread, dried fruit, low-fat/low-sugar granola, yogurt.

Here are some healthy snacks many children can make or assemble on their own:

✦ Nut butters and hummus can be used as a dip or spread for slices of fruit (such as apples and pears), crackers, pita or veggies (such as carrots and celery).
✦ Get creative. Spread peanut butter on an apple slice, then add some dried fruit or a bit of granola for texture.
✦ Buy grapes, raspberries and strawberries and freeze them. Frozen fruit has an entirely different texture than fresh and tastes like candy.
✦ Fill a pitcher with filtered water, add some slices of fresh fruit and store in the refrigerator. The fruit gives the water a wonderful flavor without adding calories. Plus – it’s pretty!
✦ Make your own trail mix. Not only do you control exactly what goes into each bag, you save money. Mix granola, dried fruits and nuts into custom blends and then store in plastic sandwich bags.
✦ Yogurt is a good source of calcium and protein. Show your kids how to jazz up their yogurt by adding whole-grain, sugar-free cereal, fruit or all of the above in a “make your own yogurt” treat.

September Is National Childhood Obesity Month

Dear God, I thank you for the food that you provide us with every day. Help me to prepare and enjoy meals to your glory. Amen.

Resources: Advocatehealth.com • healthierkidsbrighterfutures.org • healthfinder.gov/nho/SepResources.aspx • healthymeals.nal.usda.gov

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