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COMMENTARY

Hawai'i's children face battle of the bulge

By Dr. Beatriz Rodriguez

The pages of this newspaper have been filled with ominous stories about the obesity crisis that is plaguing both adults and children in this country. The most recent, "Teachers urged to help stop obesity" on Nov. 15, quoted an expert who spoke before a local group of 400 teachers and implored that "the obesity epidemic has to be stemmed with the children."

I couldn't agree more.

The situation nationally and in Hawai'i is grim. The latest study from the Federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health determined that roughly 2 million U.S. children ages 12 to 19 have a pre-diabetic condition linked to obesity and inactivity. This puts them at risk for full-blown diabetes and heart problems.

Sadly, in Hawai'i, our children are in even worse shape than the typical Mainland population. An alarming demographic trend can be seen in a study conducted by the University of Hawai'i in 2001 that remains true today. That study showed that Hawai'i's children ages 6 to 19 are overweight at a factor that is double that of their Mainland counterparts. For example, 25 percent of Hawai'i's boys ages 6 to 11 are overweight, compared with only 12 percent of those on the Mainland. Similarly, approximately 22 percent of Hawai'i's teenage girls ages 12 to 19 are overweight, compared with 9 percent of those on the Mainland. Pacific islanders are at highest risk.

This trend in obesity has spawned a number of diseases. The major health threat, especially among Asians and too many American kids are overweight and at risk for diabetes and heart disease. And Hawai'i has twice as many overweight kids as the national average. If we don't stop our sedentary ways and poor eating habits, our children will pay the price.

Pacific islanders, is the early development of type 2 (adult onset) diabetes, particularly in youth who have a family history of the disease. At the Pacific Health Research Institute, we are seeing a growing trend in adolescents developing type 2 diabetes.

DO YOUR PART TO CURB OBESITY IN YOUR FAMILY

- Limit junk food at home and instead stock up on healthful snacks.
- Limit sugary drinks.
- Stop eating fast food, or at least cut down.
- If you must eat fast food, eat smaller portions or make more healthful selections, such as water or low-fat milk instead of soda, and salad or sliced apples instead of fries.
- Limit TV and computer time to an hour or so.
- Encourage kids to play more and take part in after-school sports.
- Prepare nutritious meals.

Parents should be concerned. Diabetes can lead to heart disease, high blood pressure, kidney disease, stroke, limb amputations and blindness. There is no question that if the disease progresses untreated, youth who develop diabetes can face a diminished quality of life and shortened life span.

A recent CDC/NIH study that I participated in under the aegis of the Pacific Health Research Institute here in Hawai'i found that a very large percentage of Hawai'i's youth with diabetes have multiple risk factors for cardiovascular disease. We found that 21 percent of those youths suffering from diabetes have what's known as the "metabolic syndrome," which is characterized by three or more risk factors for heart disease. These risk factors include: high blood pressure; high blood sugar; abnormal fat levels in the blood, such as high triglycerides; abdominal obesity; and low levels of good cholesterol.

Hawai'i keiki have a higher rate of metabolic syndrome than Mainland children. Our study found 37 percent of Asian and Pacific island youths with diabetes have multiple risk factors for heart disease; it's 16 percent in non-Hispanic whites.

The good news is that obesity and type 2 diabetes are preventable. Parents can do a great deal to stem the tide of what we see as a potential healthcare nightmare. Many of these problems can be traced to lifestyle issues.

Too much time in front of the TV and computer is partly to blame for this trend. Studies show that children spend up to six hours a day in these sedentary activities. It probably wouldn't matter so much if kids were active the rest of the day, but most of them aren't.

And our children are bombarded with TV ads from fast-food chains selling foods with little or no nutritional value. Fast-food chains spend millions a year luring children as young as 2. These ads are extremely effective on the young and most vulnerable in our society. This whiz-bang marketing combined with poor exercise habits and a sedentary lifestyle has created a generation at high risk for obesity-associated medical conditions.

Though parents may have difficulty fighting Madison Avenue, they can limit the time their children spend engaged in sedentary activities like watching TV. Parental involvement is also the key to our children's healthy diets. Fast food should be consumed only in moderation — if at all. It's tempting to placate your kids with a quick trip to a fast-food restaurant, but this must be resisted. Naturally changing your children's — and your own — eating habits and lifestyle is not easy. But they are vital to a family's health.

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