



Slimming down

Written by Kim Sharpe

Everyone can help kids overcome being overweight

About 25 percent. That's the percentage of northern Colorado's children who are overweight and obese. In Weld County, that percentage soars to almost 32 percent.

"Colorado is considered to be a healthy state overall, but our childhood obesity rate is rising at the second fastest rate in the nation," says Carlee Rosen, the Make TODAY Count! campaign coordinator at the North Colorado Health Alliance.

Why are kids getting fat?

There's a tendency to blame one institution or another for rising overweight and obesity rates. Some blame fast food, others fault parents and many point their fingers at schools. But like most issues, this one is multi-faceted.

"It's not just the dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets and the over-salted foods that are making kids fat," says Deirdre Sullivan, UCHHealth Community Health Improvement program supervisor. "It's a combination of things, like kids consuming less nutritious food and getting less physical activity."

The many reasons kids are gaining weight at epidemic proportions include that they're:

- Consuming too much sugar. Sugar is in most processed foods, so even if you think you're doing well by avoiding the sugar bowl, think again, and be especially cautious about consuming sugar-laden beverages. The problem is that "added sugar means empty calories (no nutrients beyond calories) that put kids at risk of obesity," according to the Mayo Clinic. And sugar is proven to have addictive properties, so the more sugar kids consume, the more they want. Experts recommend adults and kids mostly drink water, then low- or no-fat milk followed by 100-percent fruit juice.
- Eating larger portions. Over the past 20 years, the portion size Americans have come to accept as "normal" has double or tripled. This is a problem because larger portions lead to more calories consumed.
- Eating fewer whole, unprocessed foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables. Dr. Cory Carroll, a Fort Collins-based family physician says, "A whole-food, plant-based diet is based on whole or minimally processed plants, primarily fruits, vegetables, whole grains, tubers and legumes. It excludes or significantly minimizes animal-based foods: meat (red meat, pork, chicken, turkey, fish, etc.), dairy (cow/goat milk, cheese, ice cream, etc.) and eggs. Also the avoidance of processed foods is critical."

While fresh, unprocessed food wins out as the most nutritious, there's still room in a healthy diet for treats. Sullivan says, "I don't have a problem with my son eating a cupcake if I know he'll get to go for a 45-minute bike ride to burn it off."

- Sitting more. Whether in front of a television or computer screen or in a family vehicle, kids are sitting more and moving less. The 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommend children get at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day. According to the Colorado Health Survey, 2011-2013, only 37 percent of children aged 5-14 years get this much active time, while almost 44 percent of their Weld County peers are physically active for at least 60 minutes a day. One place kids can be more active is at school.

Colorado is among four states that don't require physical activity be included in the school day schedule and the majority of NoCo elementary schools offer P.E. only once a week. The national recommendation is that elementary students have P.E. every day for 30 minutes.

Short- and long-term consequences

The concern about our kids' weight isn't just another way to single out a certain population. The concern is that overweight or obese children and teens are at risk for serious health issues, such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, certain types of cancers, and bone and joint problems.

“According to the surgeon general, obesity today is officially an epidemic; it is arguably the most pressing public health problem we face, costing the health care system an estimated \$90 billion a year. Three of every five Americans are overweight; one of every five is obese. The disease formerly known as adult-onset diabetes has had to be renamed Type II diabetes since it now occurs so frequently in children. A recent study in the Journal of the American Medical Association predicts that a child born in 2000 has a one-in-three chance of developing diabetes. (An African American child's chances are two in five.) Because of diabetes and all the other health problems that accompany obesity, today's children may turn out to be the first generation of Americans whose life expectancy will actually be shorter than that of their parents,” says Michael Pollan, author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*.

Overweight and obese kids also are more likely to experience social and psychological problems. A 2003 study published in the "Journal of the American Medical Association" found that obese children face emotional and social side effects similar to those of children facing cancer treatment. And obese children are 63 percent more likely to be bullied by other kids.

What we can do

As a community, we must address the issue of childhood overweight and obesity if we want to do right by our children. U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama believes that reducing childhood obesity is both "a moral obligation to our children" and "a patriotic obligation to our country." And it has to be a joint effort.

Rosen says, “It is an important issue to take action on now. It can’t be one organization to do it. We have to have the whole community involved if we want a lasting impact.”

The Make TODAY Count! campaign she oversees aims to do just that. One way the campaign helps kids explore possibly new, healthy food is by having them work in one of 10 community gardens. Children get to plant, weed and harvest vegetables, and then learn how to prepare them. Tasting their creations is a fun part of the education.

In partnership with the Greeley Farmers’ Market and UCHealth Healthy Kids Club, Rosen’s group teaches children about healthy eating through the “Growing Kids” program and Kid’s Zone at the Market the second Saturday of each month, 9:30-11:30am. Each participating child has fun with food through activities, receives a \$2 coupon to spend at the Market on fruits and vegetables and a reusable shopping bag.

At a recent Kid’s Zone, children made veggie bugs. “They had so much fun and were adorable to watch. When kids get to pick out their own food and play with it, they’re more likely to eat it.”

Schools can help teach kids to eat well, too. In recent years, Poudre, Thompson and Weld County School Districts have worked hard to put policies in place to make school lunch and vending choices healthier. “Healthy food in schools is a vital component of supporting the overall collective health of students in our schools and community,” says Kathy Schlepp, Thompson School District wellness coordinator. “It’s important for kids to see what a ‘healthy plate’ looks like, so having healthy choices at school provide a good visual of what their plates should look like at home.” Plus, in recent years, establishing gardens on school grounds is a proven way to get kids excited about eating more fresh produce.

Community programs, like food banks, have a role to play, too. Liz Donovan, program nutritionist and registered dietician with the Food Bank for Larimer County, says that organization’s “...focus is on offering healthy foods.” The Food Bank runs a “Kids’ Café” where this past summer, it distributed more than 45,000 meals to children at a variety of locations throughout Larimer County, including

recreation centers, Boys & Girls Clubs and a few mobile home parks. The Food Bank's chef cooks most meals from scratch using fresh food and tries to make kids' favorites healthier. For example, for macaroni and cheese, he uses whole grain pasta and a combination of shredded carrots and mashed potatoes in place of most of the cheese.

The same principles of healthy eating should apply to child-care centers and home-based providers. Plus, pediatricians, dentists and other health-care providers can reinforce healthy eating messages during well-child and routine exams.

Even with this type of "surround-sound" support for healthy eating, kids may still balk at new or different foods. To thwart that, Sullivan says, you have to keep at it. Research says it can take as many as 13 introductions to a new food before kids will try it and like it. "You have to have repeated exposures. And you can't place carrots and hummus next to the cupcakes or the veggie wraps next to the pepperoni pizza." Give kids lots of food options, but make sure they're all healthy ones.

At the end of the day, parents can have the biggest impact on their child's weight and overall well-being. "Of all the factors that contribute to the solution of childhood overweight and obesity, parents are the most important. From the center of the circle modeling healthy eating and daily (fun) ways to exercise to the outer layers of advocating for changes in schools and communities to making the healthy choice the easy choice, parents are critical to tipping the scales in the right direction."