

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Obese Teens May Have Adult Diseases”

A new study found U.S. teens seeking weight-loss surgery have a startling number of health problems that used to be seen only in adults. Half the teens had at least four major illnesses linked with their excess weight. Three out of four had cholesterol problems; almost half had high blood pressure or joint pain; and many had diseased livers or kidneys. A 2011 study showed that nearly one-third of 9-month-olds are obese or overweight, as are 34 percent of 2-year-olds. The study showed that starting out heavy puts kids on a course to stay that way. Two recent studies, one in 2009 and one in 2010, confirmed that early obesity leads to later obesity and the health problems associated with being obese. Studies have shown that the blood vessels of obese children have stiffness normally seen in much older adults with heart disease. There is convincing evidence that obesity increases the risk of Type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, stroke, gallbladder disease, osteoarthritis and cancer, among others. The prevalence of obesity has doubled in adults in the U.S. in the last 30 years and has tripled in children. There are now more people on the planet at risk from obesity-related diseases than there are people suffering from starvation. JAMA Pediatrics journal reported that some "severely obese" teens are undergoing obesity surgery and evidence from smaller studies in teens suggest teens may do better, at least initially, than adults. Gastric bypass surgery resulted in more weight loss and more improvement in related illnesses than stomach banding, as other studies have shown. Three-year death rates were low, and similar for both procedures, but band patients had many more repeat surgeries. Unfortunately, some teens in the study said they can no longer tolerate certain foods, including sugar, meat or dairy products. We should encourage teens to eat balanced meals, with small portions, less sweets, less fats and less fast foods. Parents should teach their kids to eat nutritious meals with lots of fresh fruits and vegetables and to exercise more. In a sense, parents should be held responsible for their children's unhealthy overweight conditions from a dietary and even a genetic standpoint.

In the America that I love, we know that unhealthy lifestyles with poor nutrition and inactivity leads to obesity and its associated diseases. Responsible parenting means becoming your child's "food police" and limiting their use of iphones, ipads, and other common electronic gadgets. Parents should insist on their children going outside to play. Make them sweat a little, get some healthy sunshine and cut back on their text messaging. Insist that your child be an active kid and cut down on their sugar-laced sodas. Please remember, our kids are our future.

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