

# The childhood obesity epidemic

Millions of American children are grossly overweight, a recent series of studies has found. The health and policy implications are dire. Why are kids getting so fat?

## How serious is the problem?

The statistics are sobering, and almost hard to believe. Nearly 35 percent of American children ages 6 to 19 are overweight. Half of those—some 11 million children—are so overweight they're classified as obese. Over the last 25 years, the obesity rate has doubled for young children and has tripled for teenagers. As a result, diseases once associated only with adults, such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and even cirrhosis of the liver, are on the rise among children. If the trend in childhood obesity continues, experts predict that over the next few decades, it will cut as much as five years off the average American's life span. "Our kids," said California health official Dr. Jason Eberhart-Phillips, "belong to the first generation of Americans whose life expectancy could well be shorter than that of their parents."

## What is obesity's toll on children?

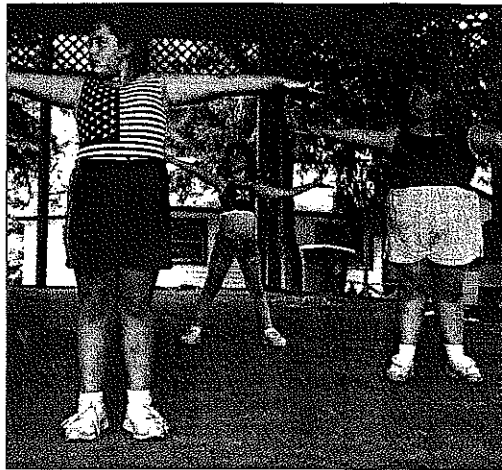
It's often devastating. The excess weight causes chronic health problems, including respiratory and circulatory illnesses and joint diseases, and the social and emotional toll can be severe. A recent Yale University study found that overweight children are routinely teased and bullied by their classmates as early as age 3, and even face bias from parents and teachers. Many suffer from depression and self-loathing, and withdraw from social interaction. "An alarming finding of this research," the Yale study concluded, "was that obese children had quality-of-life scores comparable with those of children with cancer."

## What are the cost implications?

The epidemic of overeating is a prime contributor to the nation's soaring health-care tab. The nation now spends an estimated \$177 billion a year on obesity-related health care, 83 cents of every health-care dollar. Obesity is a primary cause of the nation's top killer, cardiovascular disease, and plays a role in a host of other diseases, including diabetes and high blood pressure. Overweight children have a 70 percent chance of becoming overweight adults, which means the medical problems and costs will only get worse over time.

## Why are there so many fat kids?

In the "supersize me" culture, there's just too much food available to them, and too much of it is loaded with fat and sugar. There are more than 300,000 fast-food restaurants in the U.S., most featuring cheap, high-calorie, high-fat food served in gargantuan portions. A McDonald's Big Mac and a medium order of fries, for example, pack in 1,000 calories, nearly half an adult's recommended intake for an entire day. And kids are now drinking twice as much soda as they did three



Kids at a summer camp for the overweight

Katie Heenan/Aurora/Getty Images

decades ago, making it the biggest source of added sugar in the American diet. A single 12-ounce can of regular soda contains 10 teaspoons of sugar, and the average kid drinks two or three cans a day.

## Is diet the only factor?

No. The other half of the problem is that kids are burning fewer calories because they're exercising less. Instead of running around outside, riding bicycles, or playing sports in the park or on the street, young people today spend most of their free time indoors, surfing the Web, playing video games, chatting on cell phones, and indulging in other electronic distractions. A Kaiser Family Foundation study found that, on average, kids now spend nearly four hours a day watching TV or

videos, one hour and 44 minutes listening to music, and at least one hour using the computer. Some of these activities overlap, but they are all sedentary. And when it comes to exercise, schools haven't helped, as many districts have cut back on gym time and even recess.

## Why would schools do that?

It's a matter of priorities. The need for physical education has often been overtaken in recent years by pressure to raise test scores to meet federally mandated academic standards. So extra math and science instruction has been added, sometimes at the expense of gym class. Between 1991 and 2003, enrollment of high school students in daily gym classes fell from 42 percent to 29 percent. Roughly 40 percent of U.S. school districts have either eliminated recess or are considering doing so. Liability concerns have also prompted many schools to bar dodge ball, tag, and other so-called "run-and-chase" games. That strikes a lot of child-health advocates as very shortsighted. "If we take [gym and playground games] away, and children return home to a sedentary lifestyle," said education professor Rhonda Clements, "then we shouldn't be surprised that we have a child obesity epidemic on our hands."

## Doesn't anyone care?

There's finally something of a backlash under way. Many schools are now providing more healthy meals at lunchtime, and have chosen to eliminate vending machines stocked with soda and candy. A "bring back recess" movement is also brewing. But most experts say that unless parents themselves start eating better and exercising more, there's little hope for their kids. "Do as I say, not as I do" didn't work with smoking and it won't work with exercise and eating either," said Temple University obesity expert Dr. Bob Whitaker. "If you want your children to be healthy and fit, you must live the lifestyle, too."

## Programming kids to be fat

Even before they are old enough to read, kids often clamor for McDonald's, Froot Loops, and M&Ms. This fascination with junk food isn't inborn; it's implanted through a barrage of advertising aimed at children. A recent Kaiser Family Foundation study found that 75 percent of all ads aimed at young children and teenagers were hawking candy, snacks, sugary cereals, or fast food. With popular characters such as SpongeBob SquarePants and Shrek deployed to sell everything from Pop-Tarts to Skittles to Burger King burgers and French fries, children in the 2-to-7 age range see, on average, 12 food ads a day, or about 4,400 a year. Teens view about 6,000 food ads a year. The American Academy of Pediatrics and other groups are now calling for a ban on such commercials. In an attempt to cut off a proposal to ban advertising to children, 11 major food and beverage manufacturers have formed a coalition to regulate their own advertising pitches. The coalition claims that henceforth, members will commit to at least half of their commercials on children's programming to more healthful products. Activists are skeptical. "We need public outcry about this," said public-interest lawyer Michele Simon. "We have a public health crisis on our hands."