
Childhood obesity: the health issue

Overweight and obesity in children is epidemic in North America and internationally. Approximately 22 million children under 5 years of age are overweight across the world. In the United States, the number of overweight children and adolescents has doubled in the last two to three decades, and similar doubling rates are being observed worldwide, including in developing countries and regions where an increase in Westernization of behavioral and dietary lifestyles is evident. Comorbidities associated with obesity and overweight are similar in children as in the adult population. Elevated blood pressure, dyslipidemia, and a higher prevalence of factors associated with insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes appear as frequent comorbidities in the overweight and obese pediatric population. In some populations, type 2 diabetes is now the dominant form of diabetes in children and adolescents. Disturbingly, obesity in childhood, particularly in adolescence, is a key predictor for obesity in adulthood.

Moreover, morbidity and mortality in the adult population is increased in individuals who were overweight in adolescence, even if they lose the extra weight during adulthood. Although the cause of obesity in children is similar to that of adults (i.e., more energy in vs. energy utilized), emerging data suggest associations between the influence of maternal and fetal factors during intrauterine growth and growth during the first year of life, on risk of later development of adult obesity and its comorbidities. In addition, recent data suggest that varying biological responses in different racial/ethnic groups differently contribute to overweight, obesity, and their comorbidities. Although differences in gene–nutrient interactions may contribute, the role of varying cultural and socioeconomic variables still needs to be determined to understand these disparities.

Novel approaches in the prevention and treatment of childhood overweight and obesity are urgently required. With the strong evidence that a lifecycle perspective is important in obesity development and its consequences, consideration must be focused on prevention of obesity in women of child-bearing age, excessive weight gain during pregnancy, and the role of breast-feeding in reducing later obesity in children and adults.

Consideration must be given to family behavior patterns, diet after weaning, and the use of new methods of information dissemination to help reduce the impact of childhood obesity worldwide.

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