

Combating the Obesity Epidemic

WHY IS THE OBESITY EPIDEMIC A THREAT TO OUR NATION'S HEALTH?

A Growing Problem:

- More than two-thirds of Americans are obese or overweight.²
- Rates of adult obesity now exceed 20 percent in 49 states and D.C and 25 percent in 40 states. In 1991, rates did not exceed 20 percent in a single state.³
- Approximately 25 million U.S. children are obese or overweight. Rates of childhood obesity have more than tripled since 1980.⁴

Health Consequences:

- Obesity and physical inactivity are risk factors in more than 20 chronic diseases, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and some forms of cancer.⁵
 - ▲ More than 20 million American adults have type 2 diabetes, and 54 million more are pre-diabetic.⁶ Two million adolescents have pre-diabetes.⁷
 - ▲ More than 75 percent of hypertension cases can be attributed to obesity.⁸
 - ▲ Estimates show that excess body fat is linked to 49 percent of endometrial cancers, 35 percent of esophageal cancers, 28 percent of pancreatic cancers, 24 percent of kidney cancers, 21 percent of gallbladder cancers, 17 percent of breast cancers, and nine percent of colorectal cancers.⁹
 - ▲ Obesity increases a child's risk for a range of health problems and negatively impacts mental health and school performance.^{10,11}

High Costs:

- Obesity-related medical costs are nearly 10 percent of all annual medical spending.¹²
- Obesity is associated with lower productivity at work, costing employers \$506 per obese worker per year.¹³



- As an individual's Body Mass Index (BMI) increases, so do the number of sick days, medical claims, and health care costs associated with that person.¹⁴

Alarming Trends:

- Over 23 percent of American adults report that they do not engage in any physical activity.¹⁵
 - ▲ Only 56 percent of high school students had a physical education class at least once a week, and only 33 percent of high school students had daily physical education.¹⁶
 - ▲ Almost 33 percent of high school students watch three or more hours of TV and close to 25 percent of high school students play video or computer games or use a computer for non-school activities for three or more hours on an average school day.¹⁷
- Approximately 75,000 new cases of diabetes, 14,000 new cases of coronary heart disease, and \$1.4 billion in health care costs can be attributed to the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages.¹⁸
- Spending in fast food restaurants has grown more than 18 times (from \$6 billion to \$110 billion) in the past 30 years.¹⁹

“THIS EPIDEMIC COULD BE THE RESULT OF FAMILIES NOT HAVING ACCESS TO GROCERY STORES WITH HEALTHY, AFFORDABLE FOODS OR LIVING IN COMMUNITIES WHERE THERE IS NO SAFE SPACE TO PLAY. WE NEED TO USE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS FOR CHANGE BY CREATING COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENTS WHERE THE HEALTHY CHOICES ARE THE EASY CHOICES.”¹

-- Dr. Regina Benjamin,
U.S. Surgeon General

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PREVENTING
EPIDEMICS.
PROTECTING
PEOPLE.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO COMBAT THE EPIDEMIC?

- **Implement the Affordable Care Act.** The new health reform law, the Affordable Care Act, has the potential to address the obesity epidemic through a number of prevention and wellness provisions, including the creation of a mandatory Prevention and Public Health Fund, which has already provided funds to advance activities to improve nutrition and increase physical activity. In addition, the establishment of a Community Transformation Grant program under the Act has the potential to help leverage the success of existing evidence-based disease prevention programs. And further, the Act provides funding for a Childhood Obesity Demonstration Program and establishes nutrition labeling of standard menu items at certain chain restaurants and other outlets.
- **Make Healthy Choices Easy Choices: Creating Opportunities for Physical Activity and Healthy Eating.** Individuals must be given the tools they need to engage in more physical activity, since even small amounts of activity can lead to major health improvements. Children should be given the opportunity to be more physically active throughout the day, both in and out of school. The communities we live in should allow greater opportunities for activity, including places for safe and

affordable public recreation and increased availability of sidewalks. Everyone must also be given the tools to take responsibility for their eating habits, including nutritional recommendations and information and access to supermarkets and affordable healthy foods.

- **Improve Nutrition and Promote Physical Activity in Schools.** School meal programs should set high nutritional standards for foods served in schools. The USDA should immediately require schools to meet or exceed the 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, and implement the Institute of Medicine's nutrition standards for foods sold à la carte in schools by vending machines or other competitive marketers. Since physical activity has been shown to improve health as well as academic performance, schools must also increase the amount of time kids spend in physical education classes and work to ensure that students spend time engaging in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity before school, between classes and after the school day ends.
- **Invest in Research and Evaluation.** Continue to invest in research and evaluation on nutrition, physical activity, obesity and obesity-related health outcomes and associated interventions.

ENDNOTES

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- 16 U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance – United States 2009," *MMWR Surveillance Summaries* 59, no. SS05 (2010). <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/ss/ss5905.pdf> (accessed July 16, 2010).
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 American Heart Association. "Drinking Sugar-Sweetened Beverages Daily Linked To Diabetes, Cardiovascular Disease, Increased Healthcare Costs." Press Release, March 5, 2010. <http://americanheart.mediaroom.com/index.php?s=43&item=976> (accessed March 30, 2010).
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