



## NUTRI-BYTES

### Healthy Lifestyle Habits for Kids: A Key to Solving the Obesity Epidemic

In the past 30 years, the rate of overweight (above the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile) has tripled for children ages 6-11. Currently, about 1 in 6 children are considered to be overweight, with even higher rates in certain ethnic populations and in children with low socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition to increasing the risk of becoming an obese adult, overweight children have a greater risk of type 2 diabetes, hypertension, dyslipidemia, obstructive sleep apnea, and low self-esteem.

#### What can be done to prevent and treat overweight among children?

Encouraging healthy lifestyle habits is the key to preventing and treating overweight in children. Although healthy eating habits and physical activity are the cornerstones of treatment, studies continue to show that American youth consume nutrient-deficient diets that are high in calories, fat, and sugar and they spend an increasing amount of time in sedentary activities.

#### Who is responsible for improving the lifestyle habits of our youth?

The responsibility for addressing the issue of overweight and promoting wellness among children lies in several hands: the government, schools, medical community, and families. The federal government has recognized the need for nationwide interventions that promote healthy eating and physical activity. Effective in Fall 2006, school district policies must include goals for implementing and evaluating nutrition education and physical activity and nutrition guidelines for all foods available at school. In a national poll, over 90% of respondents said they favored healthier school lunches, increased nutrition and physical education classes, and programs for parental education. Over half of those surveyed believed that unhealthy foods should be prohibited in school vending machines.

Although schools may have an impact on children's habits, these messages must be reinforced by health care professionals, parents, and families. Here are some **simple, practical tips** for improving the health of kids nationwide:

- Offer a variety of fruits and vegetables as appetizers, snacks, or desserts
- Cut fruits and vegetables into interesting shapes...and offer low-fat yogurt, cheese, or bean dips
- "Hide" vegetables in pizza, spaghetti sauce, burritos, soups, and casseroles.
- Pack healthy lunches and snacks with whole wheat bread or tortilla wraps, string cheese, low-fat granola bars, smoothies, low-fat pudding, baked chips, pretzels...
- Offer sensible portion sizes, NOT the large portions sold in restaurants
- Involve kids in the planning, shopping, and preparation of foods
- Limit screen time, including television, computer, and video games
- Plan family activities such as hiking, swimming, biking, Frisbee, water sports, skiing...
- Encourage participation in school-based or community sports, dancing, gymnastics...
- Most importantly, model these lifestyle habits and set an example for kids