Child Obesity

Obesity in children and adolescents is a serious issue with many health and social consequences that often continue into adulthood. The term "childhood obesity" may refer to both children and adolescents. In general, the word "children" refers to 6 to 11 years of age, and "adolescents" to 12 to 17 years of age. There are many factors that contribute to causing child and adolescent obesity - some are modifiable and others are not (American Obesity Association).

Modifiable causes include:

- Physical Activity - Lack of regular exercise.
- Sedentary behavior - High frequency of television viewing, computer usage, and similar behavior that takes up time that can be used for physical activity.
- Socioeconomic Status - Low family incomes and non-working parents.
- Eating Habits - Over-consumption of high-calorie foods. Some eating patterns that have been associated with this behavior are: eating when not hungry, eating while watching TV or doing homework.
- Environment - Some factors are: over-exposure to advertising of foods that promote high-calorie foods and lack of recreational facilities.

Non-changeable causes include:

- Genetics - Greater risk of obesity has been found in children of obese and overweight parents.

Prevention is an important factor in childhood obesity. Teaching healthy behaviors at a young age is important since change becomes more difficult with age. Behaviors involving physical activity and nutrition are the cornerstone of preventing obesity in children and adolescents. Families and schools are the two most critical links in providing the foundation for those
behaviors. Parents are the most important role models for children. Results from an American Obesity Association survey show that:

- The majority of parents in the U.S. (78 percent) believe that physical education or recess should not be reduced or replaced with academic classes.
- Almost 30 percent of parents said that they are "somewhat" or "very" concerned about their children's weight.
- 12 percent of parents considered their child overweight.
- Comparing their own childhood health habits to their children's, 27 percent of parents said their children eat less nutritiously, and 24 percent said their children are less physically active.

In terms of their own behavior, 61 percent of parents said that it would be either "not very difficult" or "not at all difficult" to change their eating and/or physical activity patterns if it would help prevent obesity in any of their children.

**Create an Active Environment:**

- Make time for the entire family to participate in regular physical activities that everyone enjoys. Try walking, bicycling or rollerblading.
- Plan special active family-outings such as a hiking or ski trip.
- Start an active neighborhood program. Join together with other families for group activities like touch-football, basketball, tag or hide-and-seek.
- Assign active chores to every family member such as vacuuming, washing the car or mowing the lawn. Rotate the schedule of chores to avoid boredom from routine.
- Enroll your child in a structured activity that he or she enjoys, such as tennis, gymnastics, martial arts, etc.
People Caring for People

- Instill an interest in your child to try a new sport by joining a team at school or in your community.
- Limit the amount of TV watching.

Create a Healthy Eating Environment:

- Implement the same healthy diet (rich in fruits, vegetables and grains) for your entire family, not just for select individuals.
- Plan times when you prepare foods together. Children enjoy participating and can learn about healthy cooking and food preparation.
- Eat meals together at the dinner table at regular times.
- Avoid rushing to finish meals. Eating too quickly does not allow enough time to digest and to feel a sense of fullness.
- Avoid other activities during mealtimes such as watching TV.
- Avoid foods that are high in calories, fat, or sugar.
- Have snack foods available that are low-calorie and nutritious. Fruit, vegetables, and yogurt are some examples.
- Avoid serving portions that are too large.
- Avoid forcing your child to eat if he/she is not hungry. If your child shows a typical signs of not eating, consult a healthcare professional.
- Limit the frequency of fast-food eating to no more than once per week.
- Avoid using food as a reward or the lack of food as punishment.

When considering treatment among children and adolescents, its very important for parents and healthcare professionals to be sensitive to the youngsters and focus on the positive. Small and achievable weight loss goals should be set to avoid discouragement and to allow for the normal growth process.
Involvement of the entire family is also a motivating factor. Weight control programs that involve both parents and the child have shown improvement in long-term effectiveness compared to directing the program only to the child (The American Obesity Association). This information was brought to you by the Central Michigan District Health Department serving Isabella, Clare, Standish, Osceola, Arenac, and Roscommon Counties.