

September: Childhood Obesity Awareness Month

Written by By: Vanja Veric

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Childhood obesity is a growing concern among people in the U.S. The number of overweight and obese children continues to rise every year. As Childhood Obesity Awareness Month draws closer, we're looking at what parents and community members can do to combat this growing epidemic.



The facts
"Over the past 30 years, the U.S. has seen its youth obesity rate triple," says Dr. Floyd Shewmake, Senior Medical Director at Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that approximately 17 percent (or 12.5 million) of children ages 2-19 are obese.

"These figures rise even higher for minority youth, and even approaches 30 percent among some ethnic groups," Shewmake says.

Childhood obesity can be brought on by a multitude of factors, some environmental and others genetic, but much of the time it tends to come down to lifestyle choices and convenience.

"For one, children aren't as active as they were many years ago. Specifically, children are spending more time playing video or computer games and watching too much television – all of this inactivity leads to weight gain," Shewmake says. "Another contributing factor is of course diet – access to fast food and junk food is on every corner, while access to affordable fresh produce and nutritional meals is declining."

While the idea of letting your kids spend a little extra time in front of the TV or stopping at McDonald's a couple times a week for a quick bite might not seem like a big deal, these behaviors lead to potentially damaging habits that can have lifelong consequences on children that many people don't consider.

Shewmake notes that obese children are:

- 70 percent more likely to be obese adults
 - Twice as likely to die before age 55
 - Have a 52 percent increased risk for asthma
 - Increased risk for diabetes as children or later as adults
 - Increased risk of heart disease as an adult
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The solutions

While the statistics are frightening in their severity, it doesn't mean that we as a community are helpless to stop these conditions. In fact, it's quite the opposite.

"Parents have a responsibility to encourage healthy habits at home from an early age and set a good example by making healthy choices themselves," Shewmake says. "They can also encourage more health-based programs be initiated in schools."

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arizona offers a challengelike event each year to the state's fifth-graders.

Shewmake says that through a month-long program, kids will track their progress in the principles of 5-2-1-0. It suggests that kids get 5 fruits

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and vegetables per day, less than 2 hours of screen time, 1 hour of physical activity and 0 sweetened drinks.

Shewmake says he also encourages parents to get involved in the event and engage in the one hour of physical activity with their children.

"Adults can benefit from more exercise, because it's a good way to relieve stress, and playing along with your children promotes some quality family time." Shewmake says.

Even small lifestyle changes like removing soda or certain fruit juices from your child's diet can make a huge impact on their overall health.

"Parents need to be aware of the sugar content of soda and fruit juices," Shewmake says. "Many parents think a glass of apple or orange juice is a healthy snack, when in reality the juice may contain more sugar than a soda."

Engaging in community activities also provides physical and healthy outlets for kids and families looking to learn more about living a healthy life. Shewmake suggests community gardens and green initiatives like the [Green Schoolhouse series](#), as a positive way to introduce health and nutrition to children.

As September is Childhood Obesity Awareness Month, it's the perfect time to begin a dialogue that can change the way society approaches healthy living. Childhood obesity is a completely preventable condition and while it may take time to lower the startlingly high obesity rates in this country, the best place to start is by changing your personal lifestyle and educating yourself and those around you to the realities and benefits of a healthy life.

To learn more about childhood obesity awareness month, visit www.healthierkidsbrighterfutures.org.