



Battling Childhood Obesity - A Family Affair

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Recently, I saw an eight-year-old girl (we can call her “Lisa”) for a sick visit with cough and congestion. I had seen this beautiful child previously a few times for various minor incidents, and each time she was brought to the office by a different family member. Pleasantly shy, Lisa’s family always reports that she is a good student, well-liked, an avid reader, and “heavy” like the rest of the family.

I noticed a steady climb in Lisa’s weight over the past year, now leading her into the obese category. When I tried to discuss lifestyle issues with parents or other family members, the conversation got steered back towards the complaint of the day. Unfortunately, childhood obesity is still a taboo topic that people avoid. The reality is that most obese children have overweight or obese parents, and this is understandably a tough subject to talk about. Realizing that all of us can try to make better decisions about our diet and lifestyle can help the entire family live longer and more productive lives.

Here are some facts:*

- Childhood obesity has more than doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents in the past 30 years.
- The percentage of children aged 6 to 11 years in the United States who were obese increased from seven percent in 1980 to nearly 18 percent in 2012. Similarly,

the percentage of adolescents aged 12 to 19 years who were obese increased from five percent to nearly 21 percent over the same period.

- In 2012, more than one third of children and adolescents were overweight or obese.
- Overweight and obesity are the result of “caloric imbalance”-- too few calories expended for the amount of calories consumed -- and are affected by various genetic, behavioral, and environmental factors.

*From the CDC’s Healthy Youth campaign
<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/obesity/facts.ht>

So what can we do about it?

Crash diets or a strict exercise regimen is not going to fix this problem. Obesity doesn’t happen overnight. We need to focus on making small changes on a daily basis, such as drinking more water, eating more fruits and vegetables, and participating in daily physical activity. Particularly for children, the goal is to make healthy decisions and stop the weight gain rather than to focus on weight loss. Try to encourage school activities such as sports or dance classes, and make it fun for the whole family. Focus on the positive -- more energy, less sickness, better sleep, less stress, etc.

Back to Lisa’s story -- I convinced her mom to bring her back in for a check-up and to discuss these issues.

We spent about 30 minutes reviewing the family’s daily routine and deciding where to focus our efforts. A good breakfast plan and healthy snacking options were identified. Lisa’s mom agreed to start a walking plan (and even bring Dad along) either after school or after dinner every day. We also looked into some other community and church events where they could be more physically active.

I plan to see Lisa again in about a month to review her progress. Mom also agreed to develop her own healthy action plan, trying to cook healthier meals and be more conscious of their dining out habits. I expect to see positive changes in the entire family within the next few months.

If you have further questions about childhood obesity or how to improve your family’s health, visit www.familydoctor.org and search for **healthy eating**.

Dr. Heather M. Shelton is board certified in Family Medicine and a Fellow of the American Academy of Family Physicians. In addition to caring for patients, Dr. Shelton is a faculty member for the McLeod Family Medicine Residency Program.