

Muskegon County doctors try to fight obesity, starting in kids

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By **Megan Hart | The Muskegon Chronicle**

Type 2 diabetes. High blood pressure. Fatty liver.

Those diagnoses would be scary enough to an adult, but they are starting to appear in children, largely because of increasing incidence of childhood obesity.

Dr. Kira Sieplinga, a pediatrician at Hackley Community Care, said obese children can develop the same complications as adults, such as high blood pressure or high cholesterol (risk factors for heart disease), type 2 diabetes, breathing problems, accumulation of fat in the liver (usually only seen in alcoholics), heartburn and psychological problems like low self-esteem. Some also develop sleep apnea, which leaves them tired and makes learning harder.

They also face some problems adults typically don't, Sieplinga said. Excess weight can cause hip and knee problems for those who are still growing, she said, and a small number of overweight teens deal with headaches and vision problems because of pressure on their eyes.

The problem is that kids typically don't have a good understanding of long-term consequences, she said. Most know they want to feel better and look more like their peers, though.

"If you ask children even in elementary school, they have a pretty good idea they're overweight," she said. "Often times we talk about what do you think you can do to make yourself feel better."

About 30 percent of Muskegon County students in eighth, 10th and 12th grades were determined to be overweight or at risk for becoming overweight, according to the 2008-2009 Youth Risk Behavior Survey. The survey did not include younger children.

"I think 30 percent is an underestimate for Muskegon County,"



Chronicle photo by Matt Gade

Six-year-old Dylan Rudicil stretches out trying to reach the frisbee after it was tossed by DeYonshey Warren-Billings, 11, as program instructor Jamar Vance defends during a game of Ultimate Frisbee on Monday evening at the Muskegon Family YMCA as part of the Dash and Splash program. Dash and Splash is one of several Muskegon-area programs that try to make healthy lifestyles fun for kids.

HEALTHY KIDS, BY THE NUMBERS

Parents who aren't sure how to start developing a healthier lifestyle for their kids and themselves can start with these tips:

Sieplinga said.

A lack of access to healthy food and cuts to recreation programs don't help, Sieplinga said, but one of the biggest issues is parents who don't know much about healthy lifestyles. Increased portion sizes have distorted parents' ideas of how much food children need, she said.

"I often have parents in my office who are worried because their children aren't eating a lot," she said.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, the rate of obesity among elementary school-aged children has crept up steadily from a low of 4 percent in the years 1971-1974 to 19.6 percent in 2007-2008.

The rate among teens ages 12-19 rose from 6.1 percent in the early 70s to 18.1 percent in 2007-2008. Obesity has also increased among toddlers.

Only Oregon, Utah and Minnesota could claim fewer than one-quarter of their children were overweight or obese in 2009. Mississippi had the highest percentage, with 44.4 percent of its children overweight or obese. The Trust for America's Health reported 30.6 percent of Michigan youth ages 10-17 were overweight, placing the state 26th highest in the nation.

The statistics are based on the CDC's 2000 Growth Charts, which portray a theoretical healthy population. Children in the 95th percentile or higher for their age and gender are considered obese, with the 95th percentile ranging from a BMI of 18 in a 4-year-old to about 30 for an 18-year-old.

"Unlike adults where it's a set BMI, with kids it has to be percentiles," Sieplinga said. "It's different shapes and sizes of bodies."

Some areas have turned to controversial measures to try to lower their rates of childhood obesity. Billboards in Georgia, which has the second-highest rate of childhood obesity in the country, featured children and teens who appeared to be overweight and statements like "Chubby kids may not outlive their parents," and "Big bones didn't make me this way. Big meals did."

The Georgia Children's Health Alliance said the ads are necessary to shock parents into addressing

- Five servings of fruits and vegetables per day
- No more than two hours of "screen time," such as watching TV, playing video games and surfing the Internet
- At least one hour of physical activity
- Zero sugar-sweetened drinks

Source: Dr. Kira Sieplinga



Chronicle photo by Matt Gade

Six-year-old Dylan Rudicil stretches out for the frisbee after it was tossed from DeAvion Carter-Billings, 7, during a game of ultimate frisbee as part of the Dash and Splash program at the Muskegon Family YMCA on Monday evening.



their children's health issues, but opponents, like the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, said the billboards increase the stigma and bullying larger children already face.

Focusing on weight may not be the best way to help kids, Sieplinga said. It's more productive to find fun activities and introduce kids to healthy foods that taste good.

For parents who aren't sure where to start, she recommends the 5-2-1-0 plan. The plan says kids should have five servings of fruits and vegetables per day, no more than two hours of "screen time," at least one hour of physical activity and zero sugar-sweetened drinks.

Parents also can make simple changes like going on walks or riding bikes together and asking their kids to help with household chores, she said. And those who can afford gaming systems like the Wii can encourage kids who love video games to move while they play.

Doctors were concerned addressing childhood obesity would increase eating disorders when children's average weights started creeping up about 20 years ago, Sieplinga said, but have found focusing on healthy behaviors is unlikely to create problems.

"Targeting obesity does not increase the rate of eating disorders, but ignoring it increases the risk of complications," she said.

Some complications are hard to ignore, but others can go undiagnosed for some time, taking a toll on the body all the while. That's why doctors need to screen children for obesity and start helping them before complications develop, Sieplinga said.

Obese children also are more likely to become obese adults than their slimmer peers, and tend to be heavier as adults than normal-weight children who gained weight as adults. Michigan was ninth-highest in the nation for overweight adults, with 28.8 percent in that category.

Adults can choose to adopt a healthier lifestyle, but it's much easier to form good habits in kids, Sieplinga said.



Chronicle photo by Matt Gade

DeYonshey Warren-Billings tosses the frisbee to his teammate Dylan Rudicil as program instructor Lisa Brown defends in a game of ultimate frisbee as part of the Dash and Splash program at the Muskegon Family YMCA on Monday evening.



Chronicle photo by Matt Gade

Six-year-old Dylan Rudicil races down field as teammate DeYonshey Warren-Billings, 11, looks to pass the frisbee as DeAvion Carter-Billings, 7, follows as program instructor Jamar Vance gives chase during a game of ultimate frisbee as part of the Dash and Splash program at the Muskegon Family YMCA on Monday evening.

"The better way to identify it is when they're young and we can turn it around," she said. "Teaching a 5-year-old to enjoy asparagus and broccoli is a lot easier than getting a 35-year-old to enjoy those things."

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