

Eliminating soft drinks could help prevent childhood obesity

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A recent medical study has found that soft drinks can be a contributing factor of obesity among school-age children. The study, conducted in Massachusetts, involved children with an average age of 11.7 and found that increased soft drink consumption was clearly linked to increased weight gain.

In the past 20 years weight gain has become a major issue in the United States with a 200 percent increase in obesity in adults and 300 percent increase of obesity in children. Obesity can lead to serious health problems such as heart disease, hypertension, several types of cancer and type 2 diabetes. Former Surgeon General David Satcher stated that in the future obesity may well become more important than smoking and alcohol use as a cause of death and disease in the United States.

Because persistent obesity usually begins in childhood, prevention will have to involve the parents as well as the community.

"The most important information about obesity is that it is preventable. To achieve that goal we must convince society that obesity is much more of a health problem than it is an appearance problem," states Dr. David Reynolds of the Alabama Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

One of the simplest ways of preventing obesity is to decrease the consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks by children. Parents should set strict limits on the number of soft drinks consumed by children in the home and schools should substitute healthier drinks in their vending machines.

“Selling soft drinks at school legitimizes their use by students,” states Dr. Reynolds.

More soft drink consumption could be the cause of the dramatic decrease in milk consumption by the average student during the past 20 years. Low-fat milk consumption is an important part of a healthy diet throughout one’s life.

“Parents and schools should make sure that their children have better choices of what to drink such as milk, juice and water. Not only are these not going to contribute to obesity, but they are also healthful to the body,” states Miriam Gaines, director of the Nutrition and Physical Activity Unit of the Alabama Department of Public Health.

The only exception to this healthy regimen would be providing sports drinks to high school athletes during games or intense practices because they perspire enough to warrant salt replacement.

For more information please contact the Alabama Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics at 205-979-2750, and the Alabama Department of Public Health’s Web site at www.adph.org.

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