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Combat Obesity When It Starts – in Childhood

—Kathy Cloninger

For a long time, heart disease was a problem identified with men, middle-aged and older. In February, several activities were staged as part of American Heart Month to underscore the fact that heart disease is the leading cause of death among women. Now, a study makes it clear that it is often a problem that starts in childhood, when the ‘baby fat’ a young girl puts on becomes the root of health problems that could lead to adult obesity and ultimately heart disease.

The study by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, published in the January issue of the *Journal of Pediatrics*, shows that girls who become overweight as children remain at increased risk through young adulthood. Among those who participated in the study, girls who were overweight had higher blood pressure, high levels of LDL cholesterol (the kind you don’t want) and low levels of HDL cholesterol (the kind you do want). The study demonstrates that childhood obesity is not a phase. Girls who were overweight during childhood were up to 30 times more likely to be obese during the early stages of adulthood.

This is especially alarming because of what we know about growing levels of obesity among children. The American Society of Pediatrics has found that obesity is now the most chronic health problem among U.S. children. The Girl Scouts of the USA’s 2005 report *The New Normal* painted a stark picture of the problem. Thirty-six percent of girls in the study were either overweight or at risk of becoming overweight. Thirteen percent of those aged 11-17 meet the Centers for Disease Control criteria for being overweight. An additional 17 percent are considered at risk of becoming overweight.

The threats that obesity poses to a child’s future physical health are becoming increasingly known, including Type II diabetes, hypertension, and cancer as well as heart disease. But obesity poses just as great a threat to a girl’s emotional health. Adolescent girls who are overweight are frequently stigmatized, subject to teasing and even ostracization. This can lead to severe long-term problems, including depression.

What is causing this plague? The problems are as obvious as the solutions are difficult. Greater food portions and a more sedentary lifestyle are two reasons. The *New Normal* found a large number of girls skipped lunch at least once or twice a week (a quarter of those aged 13-15 and a third of those aged 16-17.) Missing lunch only makes snacking more appealing.

For more information go to
www.healthyweightcommit.org



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Combat Obesity When It Starts – in Childhood Continued

The deterioration in children's eating habits is matched by a decrease in their physical activity. Girls of all ages in the Girl Scouts' study reported a high level of sedentary activity at school. Only 30 percent attended daily physical education classes. The percentage who take part in physical activity during school days drops precipitously as girls grow older. And the lower the family income, the higher the likelihood that a girl is going to be overweight.

Several activities were staged in February to remind women of the risks of heart disease – including a fashion event featuring Heidi Klum, Felicity Huffman, and Kim Kardashian – what can be done to get the message out at an earlier age, before young girls develop behavior patterns that are hard to break?

In *The New Normal*, the Girl Scouts put forward several recommendations. They include giving healthy habits greater social relevance by framing them as means to achieve ends that are socially significant to girls. And embracing a holistic definition of health that emphasizes values that are important to girls – including feeling good about themselves, emotionally and physically – and emphasizing physical activities that are informal and relatively non-competitive, in environments where they do not have to feel self-conscious about their looks or ability.

Recognizing the fact that girls spend more of their waking hours in school than anywhere else, the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation, a national effort to help reduce obesity, is supporting the Healthy Schools Partnership. The Partnership educates children in the concept of “energy balance” – a science-based approach to balancing the calories we consume (through a healthy diet) with the calories we expend through physical activity.

Growing up is tough enough for girls, without the additional worry of obesity and the problems that will lead to. Since obesity starts in childhood, that's when we have to start fighting it.

— Kathy Cloninger is CEO of the Girl Scouts of the USA which is a partner of the Healthy Weight Commitment Foundation.