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**Sue Ann Says: Obesity isn't just for adults anymore**

When I was young, many, many, many years ago, my mother would send my brothers and me out of the house in the morning, feed us lunch, and then out the door again until dinner. We never complained – it was commonplace, no matter what the weather, to find children running around and playing in our neighborhood naturally expending energy and getting exercise. It was the same with my own children.

Now, I know in today's world, that's not always an option. However, today's family lifestyle is contributing to the childhood obesity epidemic, and it's taking a tremendous toll on our children's health.

In 2000, the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (HHS) came out with Healthy People 2010 – a set of health objectives for the nation to achieve over the first decade of the new century. It was used by many states, communities, professional organizations, and others to help them develop programs to improve health. Childhood obesity was identified in that report as a growing problem; and in ten years, it's worse than ever folks. Once again childhood obesity is a focus in the Healthy People 2020 initiatives.

An astonishing 28 percent of children in Wisconsin, and nearly one-third in the U.S., aged 2-19 are considered overweight or obese, according to the HHS. In fact, the percentage of children and teens in the U.S. that are overweight and obese has more than doubled in the past 30 years.

Those extra pounds put kids at risk for developing serious health problems, including diabetes, heart disease, asthma, low self-esteem, negative body image, and even depression.

So what can we do to foster a healthy relationship with food and get our children moving? Lots.

**Make better food choices**

Even though my children are busy adults with children of their own, we frequently meet at my house to enjoy meals together. I won't say that the dinners are always nutritious (pizza anyone?), but we do strive to make healthy food choices. Here's what you can do:

- Serve and encourage consumption of a wide variety of colorful fruits and vegetables, like bananas, tomatoes, broccoli, squash, romaine lettuce and potatoes. Learn to prepare them in nutritious and tasty ways.
- Make sure kids eat a nutritious breakfast (think oatmeal and fruit).
- Serve and use only healthy fats (fish, nuts and vegetable oils).
- Limit dining out. If you must eat out, avoid fast food and make the healthy, conscious choices you are trying to make at home. Consider sharing an entrée.
- Limit juice and soda. Soft drinks are loaded with sugar—"empty" calories that don't do anything healthy for your child's growing body.
- Don't turn snacks into a meal. Limit them to 100 to 150 calories.

- The portion sizes that you and your family are used to eating may be equal to two or three true servings. Limit portions to the size of your fist.
- Read food labels for information about serving size and calories.
- DON'T completely eliminate sweets! Just limit them. As a former teacher, I knew which kids weren't getting any treats at home; they were the ones unabashedly grabbing at the extra cupcakes.

### **Get your kids moving**

Children who sit too much and move too little are at the highest risk for becoming overweight. Kids need an hour of exercise daily for optimum health. This may seem like a lot, but exercise doesn't have to happen in a gym or all at once. Instead, try to incorporate movement into your family's regular routine. For instance, my daughter, Kelli, is famous for organizing scavenger hunts with my grandchildren and their little friends. Another friend plays 70s music and teaches her children the electric slide and the bump. Other ideas include:

- Organize some active indoor games. You can play tag, hide-and-seek, or Simon Says (think jumping jacks and stretches).
- Before doing the dinner dishes, make it a routine to take a walk together or bike around the neighborhood.
- Get your kids to help with household chores like mopping, sweeping, taking out trash, dusting or vacuuming which all burn a surprising number of calories.
- Because Wisconsin is cold much of the year, sign your children up to play a sport at the local Y, a gymnastics club or the local Boys' and Girls' Club.

### **Reduce screen time**

I know this sounds crazy, but I'm so glad video and computer games weren't around when my kids were still living at home. It seems that limiting screen time is a battle I see parents fight every day. The more time children spend watching TV, playing video games, or using the computer, the less time they'll spend on physical activity. Limiting screen time leads directly to your child spending more time being physically active. This goes for parents, too!

- Studies show a link between screen time and obesity, so set limits of no more than two hours per day.
- Limit time spent eating in front of the TV. Tell your child that your family does all their eating at the table.
- Don't "reward" your child with more time in front of the television or computer.

These ideas aren't rocket science, they're not even new! We just have to do them. As parents, it's up to us to help our kids make healthy choices and reverse this dangerous and growing epidemic called childhood obesity.

Because it all begins with a healthy woman.



*Sue A. Thompson*

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*The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts forums that focus on education, prevention, early detection, and connecting individuals to resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. Your donations help WWHF reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more, visit [wwhf.org](http://wwhf.org) or call 1-800-448-5148.*

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Most cases of childhood obesity are caused by eating too much and exercising too little. Many factors contribute to this growing imbalance between calories in and calories out, like:

- Busy families are cooking less and eating out more.
- There's easy access to cheap, high-calorie fast food and junk food (even our schools are serving it).
- Food portions are bigger than they used to be, both in restaurants and at home. (A restaurant serving of pasta used to be one cup, now it's typically four cups!)
- Kids spend less time actively playing outside, and more time watching TV, playing video games, and sitting at the computer.