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**Sue Ann Says: We All Need to Take the Lead in Preventing Childhood Obesity**

Childhood obesity statistics in the United States have really caught my attention as I'm sure they have yours.

Depending on where they live in the U.S., 16-33% of children and adolescents are obese. In Wisconsin, it varies county by county and by ethnic origin, but 10-20% of our children are obese. It's disturbing and such a severe problem that everyone, including parents, schools, restaurants, the media – the whole community! – needs to be part of the solution for helping our children make lifestyle changes to reverse this epidemic.

But many of us don't know where to begin. So, I thought I'd provide tips that begin at home; ideas that will help you teach your children about the responsibility of adopting healthy eating habits to ward off excess weight and potential health problems.

**What are the consequences of childhood obesity?**

It's tough to read this, but obese children are more likely to have:

- High blood pressure and high cholesterol, which are risk factors for cardiovascular disease.
- Increased risk of impaired glucose tolerance, insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes. (Type 2 diabetes is no longer considered adult-onset because more and more children are being diagnosed with it.)
- Breathing problems, such as sleep apnea, and asthma.
- Joint problems and musculoskeletal discomfort.
- Fatty liver disease, gallstones, and gastro-esophageal reflux (i.e., heartburn).
- A greater risk of social and psychological problems, such as discrimination and poor self-esteem, which can continue into adulthood.

Obese children are more likely to become severely obese adults. Adult obesity is associated with a number of serious health conditions including heart disease, diabetes, and some cancers.

## **What you can do as a parent or guardian to help prevent childhood obesity?**

To help your child maintain a healthy weight, balance the calories your child consumes from foods and beverages with the calories your child uses through physical activity and normal growth.

Remember that the goal for overweight and obese children and teens is to reduce the rate of weight gain while allowing normal growth and development. Children and teens should NOT be placed on a weight reduction diet without the consultation of a health care provider.

## **Balancing Calories While Developing Healthy Eating Habits**

One part of balancing calories is to eat foods that provide adequate nutrition and an appropriate number of calories. You can help children learn to be aware of what they eat by developing healthy eating habits, looking for ways to make favorite dishes healthier, and reducing calorie-rich temptations. Also, teach them how to read nutrition labels on all foods.

A note about calorie intake. Kids come in all sizes and each person's body burns energy (calories) at different rates, so there isn't one perfect number of calories that a kid should eat. But there is a recommended range for most school-age kids: 1,600 to 2,500 per day. Read labels and visit the various calorie counter websites and phone apps.

## **Encourage healthy eating habits.**

Sorry, but there's no great secret to healthy eating. To help your children and family develop healthy eating habits:

- Provide plenty of vegetables, fruits, and whole-grain products.  
*My tip: I keep red pepper strips and chopped carrots in a see-through container in my fridge for easy grabbing.*
- Include low-fat or non-fat milk or dairy products.  
*My tip: I buy the individual servings of lowfat white and chocolate milk for my grandkids. They're easy to grab and they're the right serving size. Just make sure you recycle the containers.*
- Choose lean meats, poultry, fish, lentils, and beans for protein.
- Serve reasonably-sized portions.

*My tip: Have everyone fill their plates in the kitchen to avoid extra servings because the food is “just there”. I am so guilty of that.*

- Encourage your family to drink lots of water.

*My tip: Place a pitcher of ice water with lemon slices on the table. It looks so appealing that everyone will drink it.*

- Limit sugar-sweetened beverages.
- Limit consumption of sugar and saturated fat.

### **Look for ways to make favorite dishes healthier.**

The recipes that you prepare regularly that your family enjoys can be healthier and just as satisfying with just a few changes. For new ideas about how to add more fruits and vegetables to your daily diet check out this great website, [www.fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org](http://www.fruitsandveggiesmorematters.org).

### **Remove calorie-rich temptations!**

Reducing the calorie-rich temptations of high-fat, high-sugar, and salty snacks can also help your children develop healthy eating habits. Instead only allow your children to eat them sometimes, so that they truly will be treats! Here are examples of easy-to-prepare, low-fat and low-sugar treats that are 100 calories or less:

- A medium-size apple
- A medium-size banana
- 1 cup blueberries
- 1 cup grapes
- 1 cup carrots, broccoli, or bell peppers with 2 Tbsp. hummus

### **Help kids stay active.**

Children and teens should participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity most days of the week, preferably daily. Remember that children imitate adults. Start adding physical activity to your own daily routine and encourage your child to join you.

Some examples of moderate intensity physical activity include:

- Brisk walking
- Playing tag
- Jumping rope

- Playing soccer
- Swimming
- Dancing

**Reduce the amount of time your kids sit around.**

In addition to encouraging physical activity, help children avoid too much sedentary time. Although quiet time for reading and homework is fine, limit television, computer, and video game time to no more than 2 hours per day. Instead, encourage your children to find fun activities to do with family members or on their own that simply involve more activity.

Believe me, I know this isn't easy, and I'm not suggesting you do all these things at once. Instead, the recipe for success is to make small, positive changes every day.

*Because it all begins with a healthy woman...and child!*

*Sue Ann Thompson is founder and president of the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF), 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, and early detection; connects individuals to health 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. To learn more, visit [wwhf.org](http://wwhf.org) or call 1-800-448-5148.*

**((sidebar – insert portion plate photo))**

To learn about proper portion size and for other excellent tips and information, visit [www.choosemyplate.gov](http://www.choosemyplate.gov).