



Hawaii Chapter

Position Paper

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The Obesity Epidemic - Weight Management for Children and Youth

Background

The characteristics of the obesity epidemic have been well documented on the mainland and in Hawaii. Incidence of childhood overweight and obesity has doubled in the past two decades. Currently, 15.3% of 6 to 11-year olds and 15.5% of the 12 to 19- year olds are at or above the 95 percentile for BMI (body mass index) on standard growth charts leading to a diagnosis of obesity. In Hawaii, the percentage of children of Hawaiian ancestry in the 6 to 9-year old group above the 95th percentile is 26.5% and of non-Hawaiian ancestry, 20.7%. Data on children in the 12 to 19 age group also indicates higher incidence for Hawaii compared to mainland data. Studies done so far in Hawaii have found a higher incidence of overweight children than on the mainland.

Factors leading to this situation include diets high in fats, calories, an increase in TV time, computers and computer games and decrease in physical activity with less emphasis on physical education in public schools. This is happening even though physical activity has been linked to better academic performance.

The consequences related to the obesity epidemic include increased incidence of diseases such as type-2 diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease and others. Obese children have the same medical complications as adults. The cost to care for these preventable illnesses is going to be huge.

Role of the Pediatrician

Pediatricians have a unique opportunity to work at evaluation, prevention and treatment of obesity. They are consultants to the family at the time the child is born on such issues as breast-feeding, introduction of solid foods and choosing a healthy diet. They follow the growth of the child, plot the BMI and can detect early signs of obesity. During the first year they follow the development of motor activity so that monitoring physical activity can be a natural part of their consultation with the family.

When the BMI reaches the 85th percentile, the child is diagnosed as overweight. Over the 95 percentile identifies obesity. These situations require an office visit for further diagnosis and treatment. There will be a complete history, physical examination and appropriate laboratory examinations to look for the medical complications for which obesity may be a precursor. A treatment plan will be instituted and follow-up visits scheduled to monitor progress.

The pediatrician also supports and advocates for the work being done in public schools to provide healthy, nutritious foods and to promote physical activity. In particular we support the

UH, DOH and DOE in training teachers to provide physical activities in elementary schools and to increase the time devoted to physical education in intermediate and high schools.

Advocacy

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has recognized the problem of childhood overweight and obesity as a major concern to be addressed by all pediatricians in their practice. A reference to the AAP policy statements is given below. The Academy recommends the following advocacy steps for its members:

1. Help parents, teachers, coaches, and others who influence youth to discuss health habits, not body build, as part of their efforts to control overweight and obesity.
2. Enlist policy makers from local, state, and national organizations and schools to support a healthful lifestyle for all children, including proper diet and adequate opportunity for regular physical activity.
3. Encourage organizations that are responsible for health care and health care financing to provide coverage for effective obesity prevention and treatment strategies.
4. Encourage public and private sources to direct funding toward research into effective strategies to prevent overweight and obesity and to maximize limited family and community resources to achieve healthful outcomes for youth.
5. Support and advocate for social marketing intended to promote healthful food choices and increased physical activity.

References:

Prevention of Pediatric Overweight and Obesity, website:
<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/112/2/424.pdf>

Chai, Dennis, et al, Childhood Overweight Problem in a Selected School District in Hawaii, American Journal of Human Biology, 15:164-177 (2003)

Shepard, Roy, Curricular Physical Activity and Academic Performance, Pediatric Exercise Science, 9:113-126, 1997HAAP