Lifewire: Study looks at link between obesity and early puberty

by Amy Winter

Childhood obesity might play a role in the early onset of puberty in girls, according to a new study.

Researchers at the University of Michigan C.S. Mott Children's Hospital have concluded that girls with a greater body mass index, BMI, were more likely to start puberty at a younger age. Their study was recently published in the journal Pediatrics.

Dr. Joyce Lee, the lead author and a university pediatric endocrinologist, said that girls in the U.S. are experiencing puberty at an earlier age when compared to girls just 30 years ago. This discovery has led researchers to assume that the higher rates of childhood obesity could be the culprit.

"Previous studies had found that girls who have earlier puberty tend to have higher body mass index, but it was unclear whether puberty led to the weight gain or weight gain led to the earlier onset of puberty," said Lee. "Our study offers evidence that it is the latter."

Childhood obesity is becoming a serious problem in U.S. society. Approximately 25 million children and adolescents are overweight or almost overweight, according to the Mayo Clinic Web site. This extra weight can affect children for the rest of their lives. They might be headed toward serious health problems that were once limited to adults.

Parents and school officials should pay attention to the possible causes of obesity provided by the American Obesity Association:

- Lack of physical exercise.

- Too much time in sedentary positions: watching television, using the computer or playing video games.

- Consuming large amounts of high-calorie foods.

- Socioeconomic status: Families with low income.

- Environment: Lack of exercise places or too much contact with advertisement for fatty foods.

- Genetics: Obesity runs in the family.

Parents and schools serve as important role models in demonstrating healthy behaviors to children. Thirty percent of parents say they are worried about their child's eating habits, and 12 percent describe their child as overweight, according to the association. However, 27 percent of parents believe their children eat less healthy then the parents did during their childhoods.

Experts say parents should build a healthier environment at home. They can make it an active lifestyle as well as a healthy eating atmosphere by:

- Participate in physical activities - walking, bicycling, etc - as a family.

- Put your child in an organized activity, such as soccer, tennis, basketball, etc.

- Reduce the amount of TV viewing.

- Develop a healthy diet for the entire family.

- Eat meals together.

- Avoid large portions, as well as avoiding high calorie foods.

- Provide healthy snacks.

- Eat fast food only once a week.

Schools need to set a good example, because this is where children spend most of their days. The American Obesity Association offers some suggestions:

- Parents, food service employees and school officials must look at the school's eating atmosphere and see if it needs changing.

- Nutrition classes should be taught in all grade levels.

- School meals should follow the U.S. Department of Agriculture nutrition standards.

- Schools need to have daily physical activity as well as health education.

During the study, researchers observed 354 girls, ages 3 to 12, from different socioeconomic backgrounds in order to compare weight to the early beginnings of puberty. The group found that 168 of the participants were technically going through puberty by fourth grade. Also, by fourth grade, 30 percent of the girls were at risk for becoming overweight or had already reached this point.

OTHER PROBLEMS

Childhood obesity causes many physical health problems. According to the Mayo Clinic site they are:

- Type 2 diabetes.

- High blood pressure.

- Liver disease.

- Eating disorders.

Obesity is also linked to emotional and social issues such as:

- Low self-esteem: Children are bullied or teased for their weight.

- Behavior problems: Children can possess more anxiety leading to reduced social skills.

- Depression: Isolation and low self-esteem can cause children to become depressed.

In the end, the study showed that even 3-year-olds to first-graders with a high BMI change were connected to an early onset of puberty.

Researcher Lee said early puberty could cause behavioral problems, an earlier exposure to alcohol and sex, as well as higher rates of reproductive cancer for girls.

She hopes that future research can discover why body fat causes the onset of puberty in order to reduce these risks.

"Beyond identifying how obesity causes early puberty, it's also important to determine whether weight control interventions at an early age have the potential to slow the progression of puberty," said Lee.

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