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Overweight Children Show Increased Heart Risks as Teenagers

A study shows that overweight children may show a collection of risk factors for heart disease by the time they are teenagers.

The findings, published in the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, underscore the serious health consequences of childhood obesity and a major problem that plagues our health care system.

Researchers found that overweight and obese 8-year-olds were seven-times more likely than their thinner peers to have multiple heart disease risk factors at the age of 15.

These risks included high blood pressure, unhealthy cholesterol levels and elevations in blood sugar and insulin, a blood-sugar-regulating hormone. Even teenagers and young adults can show signs of disease in their heart arteries (atherosclerosis) and increased coronary artery calcium if they are obese or have type 2 diabetes.

An article in the Journal of the American Medical Association reported that children with obesity experience higher rates of hospitalization, use more physician services and are roughly three times more expensive for the health care system than children within the normal weight range.

In addition to diabetes and heart disease, obese children are far more likely to be diagnosed with mental health disorders or bone and joint disorders than non-obese children.

The economic and health consequences of this epidemic are enormous. Type 2 diabetes mellitus, a disease that was rare among youth 20 to 30 years ago, now represents as many as 45% of all cases of diabetes among youth.

The findings underscore the need to prevent obesity in early childhood. Educating parents on the risk factors, improving diet and physical activity will help children to manage their weight.

SOURCES: American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, September 2007
Journal of the American medical Association, June 2004