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Preventing Obesity in Children

Childhood obesity is epidemic, affecting one-third of children worldwide.

With obesity comes many preventable health problems — high blood pressure, diabetes, high levels of fat in the blood, fatty liver, degenerative joint disease and sleep apnea, to name a few. Children develop their lifestyle habits when they are young, and parents are role models to their children whether they realize it or not. While there are many factors that contribute to childhood obesity, there are several remedies that are simple and can be started immediately at home.

Breakfast — Children need a nutritious breakfast every day. Breakfast raises the blood sugar and kick-starts the metabolism in the morning. The rate of metabolism determines how fast the body uses the food that is eaten. When children eat a healthy breakfast, it means that they will actually burn calories at a higher rate and have the energy needed to make it through the day.

Sweetened Beverages — Sweetened beverages include fruit juice, sports drinks, soda, lemonade and, sometimes, milk. Youth in the United States from two to 19 years of age consume 10 to 15 percent of their average daily calories from sweetened beverages. Most of these do not contribute nutritionally to the body. The best beverage to drink is water. Often parents don't know how much water their children should be drinking. A good starting point is to take the child's weight in pounds and divide it in half. That is how many ounces of water a child should be drinking in a day. For example, if a child weighs 50 pounds they should drink approximately 25 ounces of water per day. The urine should be clear and without odor.

Sleep — Lack of adequate sleep contributes to obesity. Typically, school-aged children

need 10-11 hours of uninterrupted sleep per night. When children (or adults) don't get enough sleep, it changes the hormones in the body that determine appetite. These hormones shut off the "switch" that tells the body it has eaten enough, slows the metabolism and makes your body think it is hungry when it isn't. Children should go to sleep without media sources in their bedrooms that can delay or interrupt healthy sleep patterns.

Exercise — Children need one hour of brisk exercise daily. This helps to burn calories and increase energy. Exercise can be fun and children can exercise without realizing they are exercising. In winter, outdoor family activities can include sledding, making snowmen and ice skating. Summer activities can include riding bicycles, playing Frisbee, swimming and going on nature hikes. It can be a time that the family can look forward to and enjoy together.

Media — Watching television or computer screens lowers the metabolism to a rate lower than when the body is sleeping. Snacking and eating meals often accompanies screen watching, which is a double whammy. Unfortunately, watching screens interferes with exercise and sleep for many people.

With God's help, we can all make some healthy changes in our lifestyle, starting with these few simple steps. They are easy to do and can make a big difference to you and your child's health! ■



▲ Susan Allen

Susan Allen is a family nurse practitioner and director of the Doctor of Nursing Practice program (DNP) at Andrews University.