

Childhood Obesity Spikes During Pandemic

Throughout the pandemic, people have jokingly said they gained the “COVID 19” when talking about weight gain over the last year and a half. In fact, the [American Psychology Association](#) (APA) found 61% of American adults experienced undesired weight changes during the pandemic.

Recently, however, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found the issue of pandemic weight gain isn’t just an adult problem. A [CDC study](#) of 432,302 American kids aged 2-19 found significant increases in body mass index (BMI) rates have occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the data, younger school-aged children experienced the largest increases.

OSF HealthCare pediatrician Dr. James Mikeworth says these findings are consistent with what he sees at his Pontiac, IL practice. Dr. Mikeworth says when the world shut down, so did activity levels for lots of kids. He also points to food insecurity issues as a reason for the shift, which became a stumbling block for many families as the pandemic shuttered businesses and jobs were lost.

“Food insecurity is a huge part of this. Not only did the pandemic affect cost of income from parents and ability to buy nutritious food, which obviously is more expensive than buying fast food or highly processed food, but it also increased the sedentary lifestyle of these kids, and so that has really drastically increased the rate of obesity during this pandemic,” says Dr. Mikeworth.

According to researchers, 22.4% of American kids are now considered obese. This is up from the pre-pandemic rate of 19.3%. Dr. Mikeworth says the more than 3% jump is alarming, because it adds to what was already a concerning problem.

“Well, we've had a pandemic, or epidemic of pediatric obesity prior to the COVID pandemic, and obviously increasing rates of obesity in children can increase rates of diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular disease and lifelong conditions that can really drastically affect health,” he warns. “We found that there are cholesterol plaques laid down in the aorta as early as two or three or four. And you know, the lifelong increased rate of that definitely increases our risk for cardiovascular disease long term.”

Dr. Mikeworth says the effort to battle childhood obesity starts at home. He says children often mirror the eating habits and activity levels of their parents, so the entire family should get involved in a wellness journey.

He suggests setting family goals like not eating after a certain time or night, or making sure snacks are nutritious, instead of high calorie or calorie dense foods.

“When I talk to parents about it, it's always the family has to change not just the kid. Because if they're sitting down eating cheeseburgers and the kid has a salad that's not necessarily fair,” explains Dr. Mikeworth. “And so, most the time that the kid needs to change, the whole family actually needs to change to make them healthy as well.”

Parents should also know they aren’t alone. A child’s pediatrician is there to help evaluate the situation and make a healthy plan if one is needed, helping with healthy eating habits, portion control, meal planning and healthy levels of activity and exercise.

According to Dr. Mikeworth, through early identification, education and healthy lifestyle changes, children and their families can improve their overall health and wellness, which is much more than a number on a scale.

“For pediatric obesity, it's not necessarily losing weight. That's not what we want, because obviously if you get an eight year old, we don't want them not to gain weight, ever, you know? Slowing down the rate of weight gain – that's really what's important.”

And, he adds, one of the most important things kids can do to start living a healthy lifestyle is quite simple.

“Get out from behind the screen go out, play with friends, get outside, because you can enjoy that right now instead of that unhealthy habit of being inactive, it'll carry through adulthood.”

To find a pediatrician for your child, or for more information about obesity prevention in children, teens and adults visit osfhealthcare.org.