To prevent childhood obesity, avoid pitfalls of American lifestyle

By Plain Dealer guest columnist
May 19, 2010, 4:30PM

During recent years, childhood obesity has developed into a very complex problem.

Now more than 32 percent of American children are considered overweight and 18 percent of children are obese. The rate of increase in obesity is highest among the country's youngest children, under age 5 years.

Part of the problem is the home environment created by parents today. One-third of American adults are obese and over two-thirds are overweight. It is their habits that shape the child's environment.

Many people blame fast food, soft drinks and larger portions. But those are just a few of the ever-changing American aspects of diet and activity.

The information age has given Americans reasons to sit motionless in front computer screens and products that require less and less physical exertion. There are many more convenience items now, such as drive-through windows, not just for ordering food, but for banking and shopping. The typical eating style has changed, as well. Americans eat more snacks, eat on the run, and eat larger portions.
The trick for adults is to avoid letting their own bad eating habits and tendency toward inactivity to be passed on to their children. As a society, there should be less of a focus on treatment of obesity and more attention given to prevention before obesity develops in childhood.

For parents, here are some prevention tips to keep kids at a healthy weight:

- Work with a pediatrician or family practitioner to learn developmentally appropriate feeding and activity levels, especially during early childhood

- Work with school and pre-school programs to make sure children’s daily nutritional and fitness needs are met

- Opt for healthful snack foods rather than foods high in calories and low in nutrients

- Be conscious of making nutritious choices and careful about portion sizes whenever the family eats away from home

- Avoid sweetened drinks in very young children because their use can essentially "train" children to prefer the taste of soft drinks over water and milk

- Limit children’s television viewing time and program selections, and make opportunities for children to spend as much time as possible outdoors – the best place to burn their boundless energy and maintain a healthy fitness level.

However, parents do not have to be alone in the fight against childhood obesity. The beginning of a new school year presents an opportunity for parents and schools to join forces in the effort. This is important because research strongly suggests a fit, well-nourished child is a better student.

One way for schools to take a part in preventing childhood obesity is to develop nutrition policies covering meals served in cafeterias, as well as foods sold for fund-raising drives or offered in vending machines. For example, a study conducted in central Ohio showed that plain, steamed broccoli was almost universally rejected by kids, while about half the supply of broccoli with cheese ended up eaten. The findings of this study suggest that something as simple as melted cheese or lowfat dip can make the difference between a vegetable’s final destination in either a child’s stomach or a school cafeteria trash can.

Another way that schools can help fight childhood obesity is to regularly teach a healthy living style. A school should be a health-promoting environment and should not simply be a mirror of the American culture, which can be detrimental to overall health.

However, these are just a few suggestions. There is no single, conclusive
method of prevention because there is no single explanation for the expanding American waistline. Ultimately, Americans need to avoid the many traps that stoke the fires of obesity. Obesity in children can be avoided, but it's up to adults to get kids on the right track.

This article is based on information provided by The Ohio State University Medical Center Media Relations Office and was adapted for use on NetWellness with permission, 2006.