

Proper Portions Could Bite into Childhood Obesity

"Large portion sizes, high-calorie foods and soda beverages, in conjunction with a more sedentary lifestyle of television and computers, are important contributors to the marked increase in obesity in children," says Samuel Klein, MD, the Veronica and Robert C. Atkins Center for Excellence in Obesity Medicine director at Barnes-Jewish Hospital and Washington University School of Medicine. "Teaching children to eat everything on their plate, even when they're full, can lead to bad long-term dietary habits."



Dr. Klein and the Atkins Center focus on both the prevention and treatment of obesity, and understanding why it causes so many diseases. The latest results from the 1999-2002 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), using measured heights and weights, indicate an estimated 16 percent of children and teens 6-19 are overweight. The statistics represent a 45-percent increase from the overweight estimates obtained from the 1988-94 NHANES results.

While no one factor can be pinpointed as the leading contributor to the obesity epidemic in the United States, Dr. Klein says understanding proper portion size can be one step in curbing and preventing obesity.



Natalie Allen, RD

Because proper portion size is important, dietitians Natalie Allen, RD, LD, BJC school-community health educator, and Tara Todd, RD, LD, St. Louis Children's Hospital, both agree the old adage of "cleaning your plate" or belonging to the "Clean Plate Club" should be discarded like crumbs off the dinner table.

"Numerous studies show that children as young as 5 years old eat more food when offered larger portions than when offered 'normal' portions," Allen says. "It's important for parents to guide young children into healthful eating habits."



Tara Todd, RD

Allen and Todd say the responsibility of understanding food portions rests on the shoulders of parents and caregivers. Both believe it's important to extend this knowledge to young children.

"Children should understand that we eat until we're full," Todd says. "To demonstrate this point, parents need to be role models. It's important to start out with appropriate portion sizes for our children."

Both offer the following tips:

- Allow children to serve themselves whenever possible
- Encourage small "first portions," reassuring children that they can have "seconds" if still hungry
- Encourage children to eat slowly and take small bites

Allen says volumetrics is a good rule of thumb when filling a child's plate. "Volumetrics is feeling full on fewer calories. Opt for foods that are loaded with nutrition but light in calories and fat. Fruits and vegetables are ideal -- and if your child asks for more, offer these choices."

And although Allen says studies have found the more snacks children are offered, the more they eat and the higher their calorie intake, there can be a place for snacks between meals. Just make sure they're healthy snacks, such as raw carrots, low-fat yogurt or applesauce.

Sources: BJC Healthcare; bjc.org