

An active and healthy childhood and adolescence is an important gateway to a life of opportunity. Eating right, exercising and avoiding high-risk behaviors are fundamental choices that impact short- and long-term health, social, educational and economic opportunities. Those who develop healthy habits are more likely to enjoy long, productive lives and to pass on those habits to future generations.

Children who do not develop healthy habits often face severe consequences. Those who do not exercise or are overweight, for example, are at much higher risk of developing debilitating and costly diseases. A marked increase of overweight and obesity, especially among children, has made nutrition, fitness and weight reduction initiatives a national priority for the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Surgeon General. This epidemic can be reduced by better recognition of the problem, by improved public policy and by promoting healthy eating and active living.





Obesity-related illness now outranks both smoking and drinking in its deleterious effects on health and health costs.<sup>1</sup>

### **Indicator: Overweight and Obesity in Children and Adolescents**

Overweight and obesity refer to increased amounts of body fat, assessed by the body-mass index (BMI), calculated as weight in kilograms divided by height in meters squared. “Overweight” is 25-29.9 BMI; “Obesity” is 30 BMI or more.<sup>2</sup>

We chose overweight and obesity as our indicator of a healthy childhood and adolescence because:

- A striking increase of this indicator nationwide and in Colorado is threatening the health and quality of life of children and teens, presenting significant barriers to the Cycle of Opportunity.
- Overweight children are much more likely to be overweight in adulthood, and currently half of adult Coloradans are overweight or obese.<sup>3</sup>

Today, there are nearly twice as many overweight children and almost three times more overweight adolescents as there were in 1980. An alarming 20% of children and adolescents in Colorado are overweight or obese.<sup>4</sup>

### **Why is unhealthy weight important to the Cycle of Opportunity?**

- Overweight and obesity in children limits opportunity and quality of life due to decreased mobility, motivation and depression. These kids often suffer from low self-esteem and are subjected to teasing and bullying from their peers. Throughout their lifetimes, overweight individuals often experience social, academic and job discrimination.<sup>5</sup>
- Being overweight puts one at a much higher risk of debilitating chronic diseases such as high blood pressure, type two diabetes, coronary heart disease and stroke.<sup>6</sup> These illnesses were traditionally more prevalent among adults, but are becoming more common among overweight youngsters.<sup>7</sup>
- Due to the growing number of overweight and obese children and teens in Colorado, the direct and

indirect costs are potentially devastating. Wages lost by people unable to work and escalating health care expenditures due to weight-related illness and disability present major economic consequences to our families and to society.<sup>8</sup> Our youngest generation will be especially impacted if the behavior risk factors to overweight and obesity are not adequately addressed now.

### How do other gateways and barriers impact overweight and obesity among youth?

■ Today's youth comprise the most inactive generation ever. Kids and teenagers not only have less physical education available through the school system, but television, computers and video games are omnipresent, contributing to inactive lifestyles. To make matters worse, fast food is increasingly replacing sit down meals in many homes.<sup>9</sup>

■ According to the Surgeon General, children in low-income and minority families are more susceptible to unhealthy weight gain. These families are more likely to eat less expensive, less nutritious foods that are high in fat and calories. In some impoverished communities with high crime rates, children may be more prone to

decreased physical activity because of unsafe outdoor environments and a lack of recreational facilities.

### What are some of the state programs designed to decrease overweight among Colorado's kids?

■ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offers grants to states for the creation of public health programs to prevent obesity and related chronic diseases. Colorado is one of 12 states to recently receive one of these grants. Directing this funding toward youth in our schools would open gateways to better life-long health and opportunity for more of the state's children.

**Preventing obesity in childhood is the most realistic option for dealing with the obesity epidemic. –CDPHE<sup>10</sup>**

### What else could Colorado do to promote daily physical activity and healthy eating patterns among kids and teens?

Children develop eating and exercise patterns early. Because most children spend a large portion of time in school, efforts in our





education system to promote healthful diets and active lifestyles are critical to combat this epidemic. In fact, the Surgeon General recently has issued a national “call to action” outlining strategies for states to combat overweight and obesity by emphasizing school nutrition and physical education programs.<sup>11</sup> Colorado’s public health department, policy-makers, program planners and school officials should take the lead in implementing the following recommendations:

■ **Both the Surgeon General and the CDC recommend children participate in at least 30 minutes daily of moderate intensity physical activity.**<sup>12,13</sup>

Colorado’s schools do not require such daily activity.

■ **School districts and communities should ensure that food options at school cafeterias and school events are low in fat and calories and eliminate or minimize unhealthy foods in vending machines.**<sup>14</sup>

■ **Lawmakers should consider nutrition education as an essential requirement to a comprehensive curriculum for school age children.**

Colorado does not require nutrition education at any time between kindergarten and 12th grade.

**A recent joint report by the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Secretary of Education affirms that participation in physical activity not only maintains a healthier weight, but boosts self-esteem and motivation among children.<sup>15</sup> They earn better grades, behave better in the classroom, have fewer behavior problems outside the classroom, drop out significantly less, and attend school on a regular basis with fewer absences.<sup>16</sup> Research also has correlated increases in physical activity among kids to a decrease in drug and alcohol use, and even a decrease in teen pregnancy.<sup>17</sup>**

### **Where can I get more information about childhood and adolescent obesity?**

- American Obesity Association website, [www.obesity.org](http://www.obesity.org)
- The Office of the Surgeon General website, [www.surgeongeneral.gov](http://www.surgeongeneral.gov)
- Division of Adolescent and School Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [www.cdc.org](http://www.cdc.org)