

## Obesity, Diabetes Pose 1-2 Threat to Young Americans

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*The result: They could be first generation to not live as long as their parents*

- Doctors have long been concerned that increasing rates of childhood obesity could fuel a diabetes epidemic.
- Study results have now underscored that fear.
- Researchers have found that the length of time a person carries excess weight directly contributes to an increased risk for type 2 diabetes.
- In other words, because today's children are expected to receive a larger lifetime "dose" of obesity, their chances of developing diabetes at some point in their lives will be greater.
- Dr. John E. Anderson, vice president of medicine and science for the American Diabetes Association, said that the findings reflect what is already happening in society, with more young children and teenagers diagnosed with type 2 diabetes than ever before.
- "A disease that used to be confined to older people is creeping into high schools," Anderson said. "At best, this is alarming. This obesity epidemic we have is fueling an epidemic of diabetes in young people."
- Obesity among children and adolescents has almost tripled since 1980, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Today, nearly one in five American kids ages 2 to 19 -- or about 12.5 million -- are obese.
- Obesity has long been linked with the development of type 2 diabetes, which occurs when the body gradually loses its ability to properly use insulin to convert blood sugar into fuel, a condition known as insulin resistance.
- "Extra weight gets in the way of the ability of tissues to absorb insulin and use it to convert glucose," Anderson said. "The more obese you are, the more insulin resistant you can become."
- But researchers now are finding that the time spent carrying extra weight matters as much as the amount of extra weight itself.
- A research team at the University of Michigan that studied the health records of about 8,000 teens and young adults found that those with a body mass index (BMI) indicating overweight or obesity for a greater length of time had a higher risk for diabetes.
- For example, the researchers found that a person who carried a BMI of 35 for 10 years -- a BMI of 30 or above is considered obese -- could be considered to have the equivalent of 100 years of excess BMI.

- The findings, published in the Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine, jibe with projections that show diabetes rates exploding as more people spend more of their lives either overweight or obese.
- "If you're born in the year 2000 and the current trends continue unchecked, you will have a one in three chance of developing type 2 diabetes," Anderson said. That risk increases for certain ethnic minorities, including African Americans, Native Americans and Hispanics.
- Diabetes is a systemic disease, and by its nature can affect almost every part of a person's body. Someone with diabetes has a shorter life expectancy, and on any given day has twice the risk for dying as a person of similar age without diabetes, according to the CDC.
- "We worry this will be the first generation of Americans who don't live as long as their parents did," Anderson said.
- What can be done to alter the potentially grim outlook? To start losing weight, kids need to adopt a set of healthy living skills that become part of their daily routine, said Sheri Colberg-Ochs, an exercise science professor at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Va., who works with the American Diabetes Association.
- "It's not just the weight, per se," Colberg-Ochs said. "It's the lifestyle they've developed that caused them to gain the extra weight."
- First, kids need to be taught to eat healthy foods and to avoid foods that are fatty, sugar-packed or heavily processed, she said.
- "When food is a lot more refined, it's lacking in a lot of vitamins and minerals that are essential to your effective metabolic function," she said. "Kids eat empty calories, and those calories go straight to weight gain."
- But they also need to become more physically active, she said. Exercise has been shown to both battle obesity and help better control blood glucose levels in the body.
- "Those two things alone would probably solve the problem of childhood obesity, were society to pursue them vigorously," Colberg-Ochs said.