

# The Skinny on Childhood Obesity

*The government issues a blueprint for the public and private sectors to address an epidemic that threatens the health of our children*

**When the Task Force on Childhood Obesity delivered its report to President Obama on May 11, the findings were alarming: One of every three children in America is overweight or obese,**

signaling a major national health crisis with long-term consequences. The report added weight to other childhood obesity studies that have found that 40% of obese children and 70% of obese adolescents will become obese adults—a condition that increases their chances of developing diabetes, cancer and heart disease.

But parents and children can take heart. The task force has suggested new initiatives to curb junk-food makers, advertisers and vendors, and has called on restaurants and schools to serve kids healthier meals. Others in Washington have already taken up the cause. And earlier this year, First Lady Michelle Obama rolled out “Let’s Move,” a national program to combat childhood obesity focused on four goals: more nutrition information, increased physical activity, easier access to

healthy foods and personal responsibility. The project is supported by \$1 billion a year in federal funds for 10 years.

Meanwhile, private-sector companies have also

joined the fight against the childhood obesity epidemic, providing guidelines and programs for pediatricians, parents, children and educators.

In November 2009, for example, Blue Cross and Blue Shield launched its Pediatric Obesity and Diabetes Prevention Pilot Program, with a tool kit geared to physicians, parents and children, from toddlers through teens. The kit contains behavior-changing tools and educational information for young children delivered by animated animal characters, including four tips



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for eating healthy and staying active: Eat five servings of fruits and vegetables every day, limit television screen time to two hours or less, get at least one hour of physical activity, and don't drink sweetened drinks.

An important element of the program is that it recognizes the critical role physicians play in motivating patients to adopt healthier lifestyles. Seventy-nine percent of participating physicians reported finding the tool kit's educational material 30% more effective than other available materials. Initially introduced in five states, the tool kit was made available nationwide in June of this year.

As part of its NFL PLAY 60 campaign, the National Football League is tackling

the problem in its own way by reaching out to its youngest fans where they spend most of their weekdays: in school. Since 2006, the league has been getting classrooms active with its in-school curriculum, the NFL Play 60 Challenge, which makes health and fitness a part of daily lesson plans. Created in partnership with the American Heart Association, the program provides teachers with 50 short activity breaks that can be woven into the school day. They include classroom jumping jacks, heart-rate testing and relays using a football. Students also get "active homework," so they can compile at least 60 minutes of exercise a day. In addition, each NFL team has partnered with local schools, after-school

centers and media partners to help teachers and kids participate, allowing the program to reach 26,000 classrooms.

More good news: Several of the largest U.S. food companies have agreed to remove some 1.5 trillion calories from their products by the year 2015 to help the fight against childhood obesity. Food companies, in general, are also backing First Lady Michelle Obama's initiative to improve the quality of food in schools

**Statistics tell the story: 40% of obese children and 70% of obese adolescents will become obese adults.**

and the home.

Although recent findings from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that childhood obesity levels may be leveling off, some 30% of school-age children in the U.S. remain overweight. That calls for everyone involved in the war against obesity to be united in achieving common goals: better family access to educational materials and tools; easier access to nutritious foods and less access to unhealthy drinks and snacks; and more opportunities and incentives for kids to stay active and fit.

Together, government, nonprofits, businesses and families are taking action to help save the most vulnerable and most important Americans: the next generation. ●

## Our Commitment to the Next Generation of Healthy Americans

### HEALTHY KIDS AND HEALTHY FUTURES GO HAND IN HAND.

That is why the Blue and Cross Blue Shield Association has set a goal to significantly reduce the incidence of childhood diabetes by engaging families, schools and healthcare providers to help kids eat better and stay active.

Blue Cross and Blue Shield companies across the country have developed many programs aimed at reducing the alarming rate of childhood obesity which leads to higher rates of diabetes.

Already we are making a difference in four key ways: collaborating with physicians to develop tools and resources, working in the schools to promote fitness, educating families about diet and exercise, and launching wellness initiatives in our communities.

We are committed to the next generation of healthy Americans. To find out about programs sponsored by your local Blue Cross and Blue Shield companies go to [www.bcbs.com/healthychildren](http://www.bcbs.com/healthychildren).



# Weighing America's *Future*

*More obese children are getting heart disease and other ailments. It's time for parents to help their kids eat healthier and stay fit*



It should come as little surprise that one out of three school-aged children in America is overweight or obese. Where kids once ran to answer the phone, played outdoors and biked to visit friends, today they need to move only their thumbs to “talk,” “play” or “visit.”

The decrease in children's regular physical activity, combined with an abundance of fast, cheap, super-sized high-calorie foods, has created an obesity epidemic and raised the incidence of additional risk factors for heart disease—high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes—even before they reach adulthood. In fact, ailments that were once diagnosed only in adults are now showing up in adolescents and older teens.

“We're now seeing teenag-

ers with Type 2 diabetes that we never saw before,” says Dr. Stephen Daniels, chairman of the department of pediatrics at the University of Colorado School of Medicine and American Heart Association (AHA) spokesperson. Type 2 diabetes is a strong indicator of later cardiovascular disease. Worse, obesity is also plaguing children ages 5 and younger. As Daniels observes, “We are seeing more toddlers who are in that overweight range.”

The AHA offers a wealth of programs oriented to families, diet and fitness, such as Jump Rope and Hoops for Heart ([www.americanheart.org/jump](http://www.americanheart.org/jump)). In addition, the AHA supports the Child Nutrition Promotion and School Lunch Protection Act, which proposes nutritional standards for food served to school-

children, and the FIT Kids Act, currently before the U.S. Senate, which would require state and local educational agencies to provide the public with information on school health and physical education programs and find ways to integrate exercise and wellness throughout the school day.

Despite all the national programs, however, parents may still be in the best position to make a difference. “Children respond to their environment,” says Dr. Alice Lichtenstein, Stanley N. Gershoff

**Ailments like heart disease once diagnosed only in adults are beginning to show up in obese older teens.**

professor of nutrition science and policy at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University.

Lichtenstein suggests a number of ways in which parents can help change eating and activity patterns:

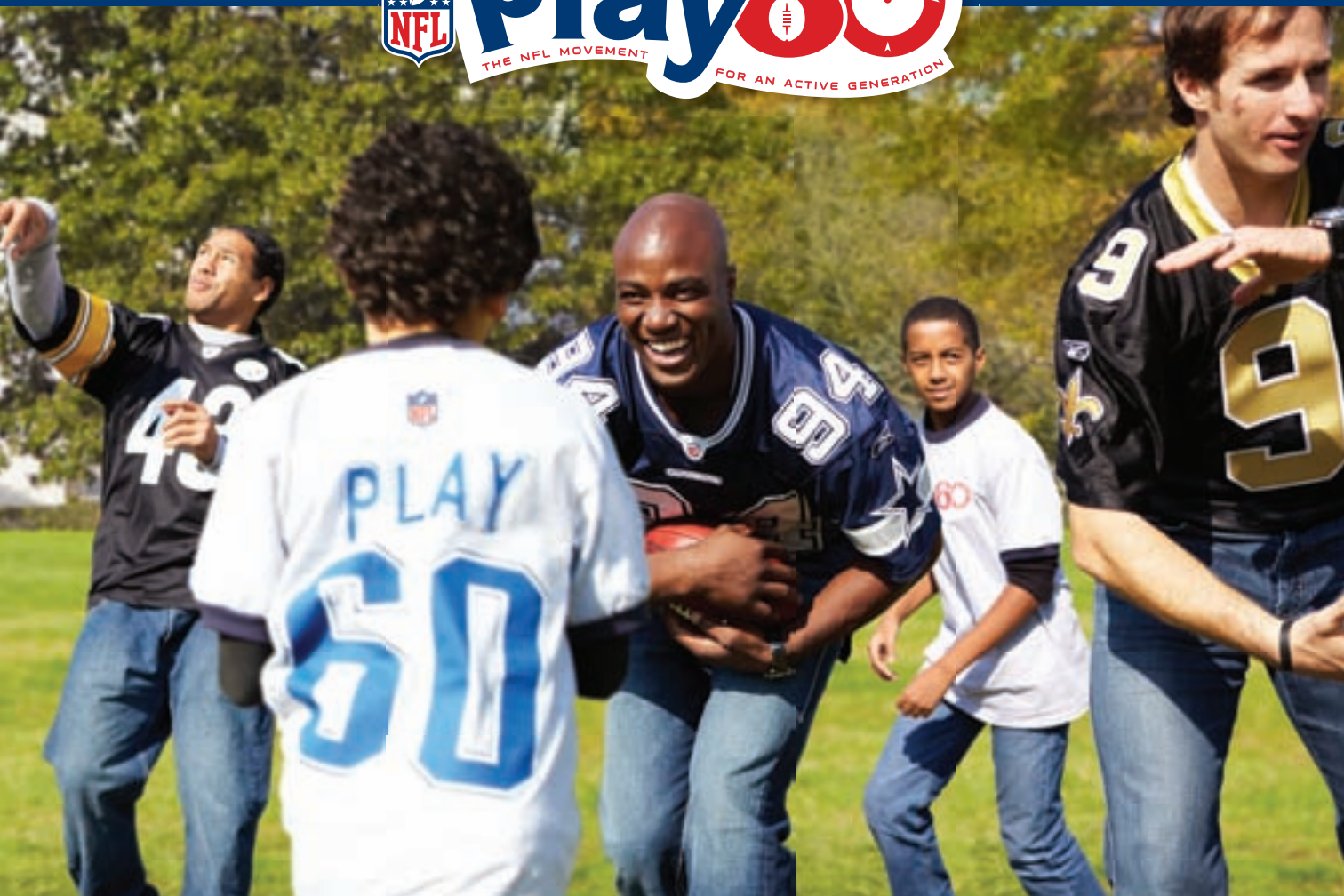
- Stock the pantry with nutritious after-school snacks such as fresh and dried fruit, whole-grain pretzels, plain popcorn and granola cereal.
- Instead of sugar-sweetened beverages, fruit drinks and fruit juice, switch to flavored seltzer and low-fat and fat-free milk.
- Sit down to healthy, regularly scheduled family dinners. What parents eat, and how much, can help kids develop good eating patterns for life.
- Start a vegetable garden—the Obamas have one—where children can plant the greens of their choice.
- Limit video game and TV time to two hours a day.
- Plan physical activity—focused family outings, even if it's only a walk or bike ride. Families that play together stay healthy.

Ultimately, it's parents who should have the first and last word when it comes to their children's health. “Parents can't do much about their neighborhoods having sidewalks so that kids can walk to school,” Daniels says. “But they can control the food that's purchased and brought into the home, the amounts kids eat and the kinds of opportunities kids have to be physically active.” ●

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**The NFL and its players  
are committed to improving  
the health of kids everywhere.**

**It starts with 60 minutes of play every day.**



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