

# OBESE CHILDREN HAVE A GREATER RISK FOR ADULT HEART DISEASE

*Early screening for risk factors can help*



**F**or many people, obesity starts developing in early childhood, when good dietary and exercise habits are neglected. It is important for parents to know there is a long term danger in their children being overweight or obese — it can lead to greater heart disease risk later in your child's life.

Childhood obesity has doubled in the past 30 years. Strong evidence shows the increase in childhood obesity has led to significant increases in heart disease risk factors, including type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol, says the **World Heart Federation**.

"There is a direct link between the two," pediatrician Sara Lappe, MD, says. "As the prevalence of obesity has increased, the prevalence for cardiovascular problems has too."

Of the adolescents who are overweight or obese, up to 60 percent have at least one **risk factor** for cardiovascular disease, Dr. Lappe says.

Heart disease remains the leading cause of death in the United States. About 600,000 people die in the United States every year because of it, says the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**.

## Early screening

Surprisingly, it's often difficult to tell just by looking at a child whether he or she is overweight, Dr. Lappe says.

**"Talking to the parents helps me determine whether the problem is that they aren't doing enough physical activity, whether their diet needs a little bit of work, or both..."**

"The only real way to know whether your child is overweight is by taking your child to see his or her doctor," she says. "We use growth charts, which use height, weight and age to determine where your child should fall in comparison to their peers."

Early screening for cardiovascular disease risk factors in overweight and **obese children** can help. By identifying your child's risk factors, you could be helping yourself, too.

One **study** found that identifying cardiovascular disease risk factors in children may even predict how much their parents are at risk for developing the disease.

The **National Heart Lung and Blood Institute** and the **American Academy of Pediatrics** recommend routine cholesterol screening of children between the ages of 9 and 11. Children should be screened again between ages 17 and 21.

"If you have a strong family history of heart disease, cholesterol problems or if your child is overweight, your child may be screened earlier" Dr. Lappe says.

The **U.S. Preventative Services Task Force** recommends regular blood pressure screenings for children with symptoms of high blood pressure or an underlying health problem that could cause hypertension-like obesity.

Blood pressure screenings should be a regular part of your child's annual physical starting at the age of 3, Dr. Lappe says.



### Chance to educate

It's important to identify children who may be at risk for developing heart disease early. The goal is not to put them on medication, but to educate them and their parents about **lifestyle changes** that can reduce their risk, Dr. Lappe says.

"It all goes back to trying to have a healthy lifestyle to prevent heart problems later in life," she says. "The goal is to get to a healthy weight now, be active and eat well for long-term health."

When she sees a child who may be overweight, Dr. Lappe does her best to get to know the family.

"Talking to the parents helps me determine whether the problem is that they aren't doing enough physical activity, whether their diet needs a little bit of work, or both," Dr. Lappe says.

