Static growth in obesity rates among kids no reason to celebrate, health officials say

By SONJA ISGER

Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Updated: 7:25 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 17, 2012
Posted: 5:11 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 17, 2012

The growing girth of the nation's children has taken a pause, leaving us with an obesity rate unchanged from two years ago, but still three times what it was in 1980, according to a study published online Tuesday by the Journal of American Medical Association.

The news comes in a year in which child protective services in Ohio felt obliged to take an 8-year-old from his mother when he topped 200 pounds. It comes in a season when talk show hosts are debating the merits of a controversial black-and-white video ad campaign in which a beefy boy asks his mother "Why am I fat?" And it comes shortly after Congress considered calling the spoonfuls of sauce on pizza a vegetable in school lunches.

"We're the fattest society of the world, and likely to be the fattest in the history of the world," said Dr. Charles Hennekens, a professor at Florida Atlantic University's Schmidt College of Medicine. "To say it (the child obesity rate) is not going down, I don't find that comforting."

Few health professionals do.

Nearly one in three children ages 2 through 19 years of age were either overweight or obese in 2009-10, according to data collected by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey.

About 17 percent were simply obese.

These statistics may be among the most reliable as height and weight measurements of 4,111 were taken by surveyors to calculate each person's Body Mass Index, or BMI.

When University of Miami research associate professor Sarah Messiah drills down into the details she finds many trends uncovered in the report's review of the past decade disturbing.

"There are big racial and ethnic disparities, and gender disparities," Messiah said.

For example, Hispanic and non-Hispanic black children and adolescents had obesity rates of 21 percent and 24 percent compared with a 14 percent rate in white children, the study reported.

Adolescent boys were more likely to be obese than girls at rates of 18.6 percent versus 15 percent - a difference the study authors termed "significant."
"The authors also found that there was a significant increase in the BMI of adolescent males ages 12 through 19 years but not among any other age group or among females," said the JAMA release on the findings.

More than 12 percent of all children ages 2 to 19 years were not only obese, but what is termed in adults as morbidly obese with BMIs in the 97th percentile and above.

"So many of our efforts to date have been blanket, not even thinking gender and race. These numbers say to me, we need to think more about tailoring the message," Messiah said.

Adult obesity rates also went mostly unchanged in 2009-10, according to another study published Tuesday in JAMA. But many health authorities believe the way to curb the medically devastating and costly epidemic is to address and prevent it in children.

That's why so many efforts nationally and locally aim young. The Palm Beach County School District has worked for more than six years to improve the health of school lunches - this year, for example, officials trimmed some fat out of chocolate milk.

A principal at one elementary has declared a ban on cookie- and cake-centered parties, and has children growing vegetables on campus.

"We clearly have a lot of work to do," said Dr. Catherine Drourr, director of the nonprofit Healthy Kids of Jupiter, which promotes educational programming. "Hopefully the tides are turning. People are starting to listen."

Staff researcher Niels Heimericks contributed to this story.