

## Remarks of Robert Eckel, MD President-Elect of the American Heart Association May 3, 2005

Thank you, Dr. Jacobs.

You can't turn on the television or read the newspapers today without seeing a story about obesity and how it's affecting our nation's youth. Statistics say that about 16 percent of all children and teens in this country are overweight. 16 percent. This doesn't seem like a large number. Is this really such a big problem?

The answer is a resounding yes. Why does the American Heart Association feel that childhood obesity is one of the most critical issues facing America's youth today?

1. Because even more disturbing than the actual prevalence of obesity in children is the startling rate at which obesity is rising – they have doubled in children and tripled in teens since 1980.
2. Because kids never before needed to worry about “adult” problems like high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and high cholesterol. But thanks to the rise in obesity, now they do.
3. Because we've never had such a high proportion of kids whose lives will be burdened too early with heart attacks and strokes and heart failure and life-changing physical disabilities.
4. Because we never had so many kids who can't fit into “kid-size” clothes, who are too heavy to compete in games, who don't feel good about themselves.

If this isn't enough to convince us of the seriousness of this problem, we need only look as far as America's pocketbook.

According to the World Bank, obesity accounts for 12 percent of the nation's health care budget. Obesity-related annual hospital costs for children more than tripled between 1979 and 1999. And, economic costs to U.S. businesses from obesity-related illnesses represent about 5 percent of total medical care costs.

Our children deserve better than this. We need to address this issue now and make preventing childhood obesity a top priority for our nation.

The American Heart Association and the Clinton Foundation have created an innovative alliance to stop the increasing prevalence of childhood obesity over the next 10 years. To do this we need to help not only those kids who already have weight problems, but we have to ensure that all children are empowered to make heart-healthy choices that help them avoid unhealthy weight gain. And even children who are a normal weight are at risk for developing high blood pressure, high cholesterol, or diabetes if they eat too much and don't get enough exercise.

The fact is that the environment that we live in today doesn't always make it easy for kids to make healthy choices – and this environment is contributing to our nation's growing waistline.

Today's environment makes it harder for Americans to get enough physical activity. The American Heart Association recommends at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on most days of the

week. But nearly a quarter of our children get no free-time physical activity at all. Many schools have dropped physical education programs which for some kids provides their only opportunity to get up and move. And our kids are watching more television, playing video games and sitting in front of the computer for hours at a time – a dramatic change in the environment in just the last two decades.

The current environment also makes healthy eating more of a challenge for kids than ever before. Portion sizes have grown and people are favoring more convenient, but often less healthy restaurant meals over healthier home-cooked meals. Families are busier than ever, making fast food an appealing option. Manufacturers of less healthy food options are marketing their products to kids every day.

The task we face is a daunting one. It won't be easy to change the environment that has evolved over the past several decades. But we do have a plan of attack. And by working together, the American Heart Association, President Clinton, Governor Huckabee and other partners across the nation can help foster an environment that helps all kids pursue a healthy lifestyle.

To do this, we will speak to a variety of audiences — industry, health care providers, schools, the media and consumers — and focus on several key areas that have a major impact on the lifestyles and behaviors of children.

We plan to work with the food and fitness industries to help them make changes that encourage healthier eating and more physical activity for kids. We need to improve the quality of kids' diets, so that they have a balanced intake of a variety of foods, emphasizing healthy choices like fruits and vegetables, whole grains, low-fat or fat-free dairy products, and the appropriate amounts of protein and fats, while avoiding saturated and trans fats. A key to preventing weight gain is to provide them with the right amount of food, not the excessive portion sizes we have seen in recent years. And we need to be sure that our kids move when they play, that they grow up enjoying physical activity and making it part of their lives.

We will develop tools and provide continuing education opportunities that help health care providers better prevent, recognize and even treat obesity in children.

Kids spend most of their days in school, so we plan to work with school leaders to ensure that students have opportunities to engage in physical activities and are given healthy food choices in cafeterias and in vending machines.

The entertainment industry has great influence over children. We want to collaborate with the media to create a public education campaign that will encourage healthy lifestyles and increase understanding of the benefits of good nutrition and physical activity.

We know that the family environment is key to helping children develop life-long healthy habits. Parents need tools to help them incorporate these habits into their every day routines. We hope to arm them with the information and resources they need to make that easier.

We also plan to launch a "for kids, by kids" movement to mobilize youth — particularly those ages 9 to 13 — to take charge of their own health and lead healthier lives.

This last area is critical if we are truly going to impact the lives of our youth. We need to go right to the source and bring kids into the equation – all kids. This is not just about kids who are already overweight or obese. This is about helping kids of all shapes and sizes to take charge of their own health and create a lifelong philosophy that emphasizes balance, better nutrition and increased activity.



Alliance  
for a  
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[www.HealthierGeneration.org](http://www.HealthierGeneration.org)

The new “for kids, by kids” campaign, which will launch later this year, will be a positive movement that will speak uniquely to this generation of young people. We are not just going to educate kids about healthy lifestyles, but involve them by engaging them and inspiring them to be leaders and agents of change within their own families and communities. We want them to see this as their own cause so their generation can be the strongest it can be. We are creating something we know will be appealing because we are involving kids in the process of developing the campaign.

Finally, we know that moving the needle won’t always be easy. Childhood obesity did not become a problem overnight. But the strength of this Alliance, along with many other partners along the way, will help us protect America’s children from forming habits now that will cause heart disease and stroke later in their lives.

President Clinton and Governor Huckabee are passionate and committed advocates for this cause. The American Heart Association is very proud to be standing with them here today as we begin our work together to create a generation of healthier Americans.

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