

[Transcript: President Clinton talks about Healthier Generation Initiative on Good Morning America](#)

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Diane Sawyer, ABC News:

And now, a major announcement this morning. Nine million American children ages six and older are overweight. That's a whopping 16 percent. But here's another number that should sober every parent, it's four times the rate of just 20 years ago. Well, President Bill Clinton and Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee are teaming up to fight back along with the



Credit: Good Morning America

American Heart Association, led by Dr. Robert Eckel. And they join us from Manhattan's Public School Number 128. Mr. President, Governor, Doctor, sounds like a kid's what do you want to be when you grow up game, doesn't it? But welcome to all three of you this morning.

Former President Bill Clinton, United States:

Thank you, Diane.

Doctor Robert Eckel, American Heart Association:

Thank you.

Diane Sawyer:

(Off Camera) Mr. President, all of the issues out there that you have tackled, why this one? Why is this one so close to your heart?

Former President Bill Clinton:

Well, I think I've been more sensitive to it because of my recent heart problems, and because I had to come to terms with the fact that they came about, not only because of my predisposition to high cholesterol, but because of decades of poor eating habits. You know, even in the years when I was exercising vigorously, I consumed a diet that was not good. And I was overweight when I was a kid, so I've struggled with this on and off all my life. And I thought that in view of the publicity that my heart problems got, I might be able to have an impact on childhood obesity. Furthermore, I think the consequences are enormous. You've got

have an impact on childhood obesity. Furthermore, I think the consequences are enormous. You've got onset of adult diabetes in children now, plainly because of their eating habits, aggravated by the lack of exercise. But we, we've got to change the eating habits of America's young people.

Diane Sawyer:

(Off Camera) I know you've got a kind of four, 4-pronged attack. Kids having peer pressure with other kids. Also restaurants changing their menus. Doctors speaking to parents about weight as a part of health care.

Diane Sawyer:

(Voice Over) And also, the schools tackling it. But I know that you wrote very poignantly in your book about being a child and being ridiculed for being overweight when you were young. What do you think really reaches kids? What do you think does make a difference?

Former President Bill Clinton:

Well, I think having a lot of support and having easy options, and also having parents and school officials guide their eating habits. I, I think the system is now rigged to aggravate obesity. And a lot of school diets and vending machines and the quality and the kinds of food offered in eating establishments, particularly in fast-food establishments, we have to change that. The environment has changed for our children, the eating environment, over the last 20 years and it's made a huge difference. And if you just reduced the number of calories that our children are taking in by 50 a day, it -would make a huge difference to them over the course of their childhoods.

Diane Sawyer:

(Voice Over) But Governor Huckabee, each of you comes to this with a personal message for parents.

Diane Sawyer:

(Off Camera) And - am I right? You lost 105 pounds?

Governor Mike Huckabee, Arkansas:

That's, that's right, Diane. Over the course of about a year, started exercising. Finally realized that, as a leader, I couldn't ask others to do what I was unwilling to do. We have a huge epidemic of obesity in our population, in our state, as we do across the nation, and I realized that for me I was digging my own grave with a knife and fork and needed to make some changes, and it's, it's made a dramatic difference in my own life, but also in the lives of others. And we're taking some initiatives in Arkansas to try to attack childhood obesity.

Diane Sawyer:

(Off Camera) And another collateral issue, of course, is diabetes. And, and you reversed it with the weight loss, right?

Governor Mike Huckabee:

I did. I no longer take medication. Again, there's a financial incentive. I'm going to save a fortune not having to take prescription medication for the rest of my life. But the greatest benefit of all is I'm going to live

longer. My doctor sat my down and said, if you don't change your lifestyle, you're in the last decade of your life. And it really shook me up. And I thought, you know, this is crazy. I don't need to be doing this. I want to outlive all the Democrats, too, so, you know, the only way to do that is, is to change my health. And the great thing, this, this is so not a political issue. This is about people and about their health. And I think one of the reasons that, that I'm really happy to be here with President Clinton and appreciate his courage in taking leadership in this is because this transcends all the normal polarities that typically cause people to choose sides. Everyone wants to choose good health and that's what we're hoping to do.

Diane Sawyer:

(Off Camera) Dr. Eckel, there was a recent study that came out that I bet worried you a bit because it was a study that seemed to suggest, as we all read just a few days ago, that people, adults at least, who are a little hefty, not fully obese, in fact have lives that -are longer than those who are thin. What is this confounding information about? And how does it come down to kids?

Doctor Robert Eckel:

Well, I think it's important to recognize that these are dated, that are reported from observational studies over about 10 years. So, we're looking at the impact of being overweight or being obese on, on mortality over a very short interval. And the epidemic in children really is kind of a recent problem, and for the most part, the impact of having excess body fat doesn't really influence health for 20 to 40 years. So, I think the epidemic of obesity now needs to be our focus. We shouldn't be concerned about historic data that may not be relevant to our younger population.

Diane Sawyer:

(Off Camera) And Governor Huckabee, what's the right age to start with kids, because we know a lot of parents start at two, three. I know you have letters going out into the community, what do you say is the right age to start watching it with kids?

Governor Mike Huckabee:

Well, I think as soon as they're born we need to be careful what they're eating and the kind of exercise they're getting. In Arkansas, we do a body mass index test of every public school student. We send that report discreetly and confidentially to the parents to say that if your child has a body mass index of 25 or over your child may have the tendency to become either obese or overweight. And the reason that's important, a child who is diagnosed with Type Two Diabetes as a pre-teen is the kind of kid who's going to have vision problems in his 20's, a heart attack by the time he's 30, he'll be on full kidney dialysis by the time he's 40, that kid will never see a 50th birthday. And we're raising the first generation of American kids who aren't expected to live as long as their parents and grandparents, and that ought to scare us into action.

Diane Sawyer:

(Off Camera) And Mr. President, going to drive this initiative for 10 years?

Former President Bill Clinton:

What -I'm sorry, Diane, what did you say?

Diane Sawyer:

(Off Camera) This is a 10 year initiative? This isn't, this isn't just ...

Former President Bill Clinton:

Yeah, I think - I think, I think we have to be prepared to do this over 10 years. The, the trends are what really bothers me. You mentioned that Governor Huckabee had been able to stop taking medication for a diabetes problem. We're dealing with massive health care costs in America today and an enormous percentage of the Medicare/Medicaid costs are directly related to diabetes. Staggering. And this is something that is going to just swallow up our society in terms of human loss and financial loss, but you can't turn it around overnight. I hope we'll get a lot of help. I'm encouraged by messages I've already seen from doctors who are working with various food establishments who are trying to change the content of their diets. It's not just as simple as offering one healthy meal at a big long menu, we need to change, reduce the fat content and the sugar content of a lot of what we're offering to our young people. And we can do this. And we can become a much healthier country as a result. So, if it takes a decade, we'll give it a decade.

Diane Sawyer:

(Off Camera) And outlive all the Republicans?

Former President Bill Clinton:

Oh, I, I don't know. I'm just grateful for everyday now. My, my attitude about that has changed. I hope to outlive a Democrat or two.

Diane Sawyer:

(Off Camera) Well, we thank you so much, Governor, Mr. President. And Dr. Eckel, thank you, too. I want everybody out there to know that if you want to join in on this or read more about it, you can visit.