

Nine million kids in the U.S. are considered overweight. That's three times the number in 1980. Health officials call the growing rate of youth obesity a national crisis.

# Childhood Obesity

by Victor Landauro

**F**ourteen-year-old Michael Tyson—named after her father, the former boxing champion—dreams of her sweet-16 birthday party. “It’ll be a big party, just like in *Cinderella*,” she told *JS*. “I’ll be the last one to come in, and everyone will look at me and say, ‘Oh, you look so pretty.’ Everyone will be so happy to see me.”

Another part of Michael’s fantasy, however, means much more to her than any kind of celebration. “Losing weight has been my dream forever,” she says. “But it’s so hard. Sometimes I don’t think my dream will come true.” At 5’9”, Michael weighs about 320 pounds, which, doctors say, is unhealthy.

According to the American Obesity Association (AOA), about 30 percent of U.S. teens are overweight, and slightly more than 15 percent are **obese**. “Childhood obesity is a serious disease,” says AOA President Judith Stern. “Some obesity-related conditions once seen only in adults are now common in kids.”

Many overweight children suffer from a number of medical conditions, including high blood pressure, **sleep apnea**, and liver disease. Overweight children are also at risk for developing **type 2 diabetes** and heart disease.

## A Family Problem

Health professionals consider several factors when determining whether a child is obese. In addition to assessing height and weight, they look for such indicators as high blood pressure, **orthopedic** (skeletal) problems, and skin disorders.

Studies show that children with obese parents are more likely to be obese. Whether this is the result of genetics or personal behavior is not yet known.

“Childhood obesity is a family problem,” says Philip E. Vincent, a psychiatrist at the Child and Family Institute at St. Luke’s-Roosevelt Hospital in New York City. The clinic offers medical, nutritional, and emotional counseling to obese and overweight children and their

families. “Parents are important,” says Vincent, “because they are key to the kinds of food that enter the home, [and] what times meals are eaten.” Teens who attend the clinic with a parent show greater long-term improvement in managing their weight.

## Positive Reinforcement

It is no secret that overweight teens suffer from teasing. This can affect self-esteem, and lead to depression or isolation. “People make comments to make me feel bad,” Michael says. “Sometimes I think,

## Words to Know

- **obese**: extremely, unhealthy overweight.
- **type 2 diabetes**: a form of diabetes in which the body does not produce enough insulin or the cells ignore the insulin. (Insulin is necessary for the body to convert sugar into energy.)
- **sleep apnea**: a disorder characterized by short interruptions of breathing during sleep.

# HEALTH TIPS

Here are some tips from experts:

## ◆ Eat a good breakfast.

"You might not have time for breakfast," says Tara Ostrow, "but it really is the most important time to get the energy you need for the whole day." Breakfast, Ostrow adds, should be the largest meal of the day.



## ◆ Eat fewer foods that are high in calories, sugar, and fat.

Fast food, sodas, and high-sugar fruit juices are loaded with calories. It's not necessary to give them up completely. Just keep consumption of them to a minimum.



## ◆ Eat smaller portions.

You don't have to eat a large portion just because it is served to you. "Avoid having the Big Gulp, or the large popcorn at the movies," says Judith Stern. "Even if you think you won't finish it all, you'll end up eating more than you would have had you ordered a smaller size."

## ◆ Exercise.

It is no coincidence that childhood obesity rates have increased as sales of video games and DVDs have skyrocketed. Don't be a couch potato. "Get outside, walk home from school, take the stairs whenever possible, try to get involved in after-school activities," says Ostrow. "Play your favorite song and dance in front of a mirror. Even dancing is exercise!"



## ◆ Keep a positive attitude.

"You have to change your way of thinking," says Philip E. Vincent. "Don't let verbal abuse from other kids weaken your determination to lose weight. A positive attitude helps motivate kids to become healthier and to maintain a higher self-esteem."

