

Weighty problem

Obesity-rate projections point to a future with more chronic disease

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The Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease recently projected that 10 years from now, half of all Ohioans could be obese, up from 34 percent last year. Much of that problem begins in childhood.

Efforts are under way in government and schools to help families keep better tabs on kids' nutrition and weight. Bills in the Ohio Senate and House would focus on schools, requiring students in public schools to have at least 30 minutes of moderate-to-rigorous physical exercise per day and increasing the required number of physical-education classes.

The legislation also would mandate healthier foods and drinks in school vending machines and would require schools to measure students' body-mass index in certain grades and to tell parents the scores, along with some information about obesity and nutrition.

The bills deserve attention, because fighting childhood obesity is critical to the nation's health and necessary to control health-care costs. Obese children are four times as likely to develop diabetes and twice as likely to have asthma as are children of healthy weight. Children who are overweight at age 10 have an 80 percent chance of being overweight as adults.

Obesity also causes higher rates of heart disease, stroke, cancer and high blood pressure.

Many school districts also have acted on their own, banning sugary soft drinks and pumping up the nutritional content of school lunches.

On another front, the federal Women, Infants and Children (WIC) nutrition program, long known for providing milk, eggs and cheese to pregnant women and new mothers and their babies, is being overhauled to push more fresh fruits and vegetables and fewer dairy products.

This hasn't been a smooth process. Adding thousands of products to the list of those that can be bought with WIC funds presents a challenge for stores and customers. Some advocates for the poor wonder how much luck poor families will have in getting foods that are better for you, given that people without cars often are stuck shopping at neighborhood convenience stores that predominate in poor neighborhoods and don't carry many fresh nor healthful foods.

The United States has plenty of healthy foods. No one should grow obese on a cheap diet of empty calories.

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