

# The Weightiest Issue

Obesity threatens to steal years from children's lives

**G**uiding our children away from the path to obesity is going to take a serious change in culture, nutrition experts and health professionals tell us.

It's the only way to reverse the alarming reality that today's obese children may die 10 years sooner than their parents, according to area experts.

This is why the Onondaga County Health Department's "community call to action" is important. Schools, faith-based organizations, health care

institutions and various companies gathered at the Oncenter Wednesday to raise awareness and to suggest ways to combat obesity.

About 56 percent of Upstate adults are either overweight or obese, according to a survey.

Officials recommend that families make healthy eating a family affair; set aside time for regular physical activity; limit television time; and avoid pre-packaged frozen dinners and boxed lunch snacks. Schools can enforce mandatory physical education requirements and/or expand physical activity to at least 30 minutes a day and provide healthy foods in vending machines. Communities can protect open spaces and build sidewalks,



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bike paths, parks, playgrounds and pedestrian zones to promote walking and exercise.

Considering the latest studies detailing the impact of childhood obesity, health problems and shorter life expectancy, all of it will be well worth the effort.

The warnings about shorter life expectancies, coming from a childhood nutrition expert, pediatricians and other health professionals at Upstate Medical University, should help to tip the balance from complacency or skepticism to action.

Obesity is the nation's top public health problem, said Rachel Johnson, professor of nutrition and dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at the University of Vermont.

And it's costing us all dearly, as well

It costs more to treat obesity-related diseases than it does for tobacco- and alcohol-related diseases combined, Johnson said. About 300,000 deaths each year are attributed to obesity. Children whose parents are obese are at greater risk for obesity, so doctors are encouraged to target parents for weight loss and nutrition talks.

That's the bad news. The good news is there's plenty we can do about it at the family, school and community levels.