

**HOW AMERICAN MOMS PERCEIVE
CHILDHOOD OBESITY**

**A SURVEY OF THE OBSTACLES KEEPING
MOMS FROM IMPROVING THEIR CHILDREN'S
WEIGHT STATUS**



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Executive Summary

Over the past 30 years, childhood obesity has more than tripled in the United States¹ and now affects children as young as age 2. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 10.4 percent of children ages 2 years to 5 years are classified as overweight or obese² while almost one in five children between the ages of 6 years and 19 years are at an unhealthy weight (19.6% among those 6 years to 11 years and 18.1% of adolescents ages 12 years to 19 years).³

From a public health perspective, these statistics represent a looming crisis. More children today are at increased risk for associated so-called “adult diseases” and these diseases are occurring earlier in life, including heart disease, diabetes, stroke, several types of cancer and osteoarthritis.⁴ In fact, in one recent population-based sample of 5-year-olds to 17-year-olds, 70 percent of obese children and teens already had one risk factor for cardiovascular disease and 25 percent had two.⁵

To address this growing health threat, First Lady Michelle Obama, the current and all living former U.S. Surgeons General, and such medical societies as the American Academy of Pediatrics are speaking very publicly about the need for parents to play an active role in fighting childhood obesity. Now the questions become are parents prepared to heed this call and if not, why not?

To answer these important questions, Shape Up America! and the National Turkey Federation (NTF) recently commissioned a survey of 500 mothers with children between the ages of 6 years and 16 years to gauge the extent to which concerns about childhood obesity have shifted parents' attitudes about their children's weight status. Conducted by ORC International (ORC), this online survey presents an important wakeup call for the nation: more than three-quarters of moms whose children are overweight don't recognize this fact and are not taking simple steps to improve their children's weight status. The survey also uncovers a number of barriers that make it more difficult for moms to reduce the fat and calories in family meals, and to add more physical activity to their children's daily routines.

¹ Ogden CL, Carroll MD, Curtin LR, Lamb MM, Flegal KM. Prevalence of high body mass index in US children and adolescents, 2007–2008. *JAMA* 2010;303(3):242–9.

² Findings from the 2007–2008 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

³ Findings from the 2007–2008 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

⁴ U.S. Surgeon General. *Overweight and Obesity: Health Consequences*. Rockville: MD; 2001.

⁵ Freedman DS, Zuguo M, Srinivasan SR, Berenson GS, Dietz WH. Cardiovascular risk factors and excess adiposity among overweight children and adolescents: the Bogalusa Heart Study. *Journal of Pediatrics* 2007;150(1):12–17.

Besides charting the extent to which mothers are taking steps to manage their children's weight, these new survey findings are especially noteworthy because ORC obtained information from the mothers surveyed about the height, weight, age and gender of their youngest child and then calculated each child's Body Mass Index (BMI) and the BMI Percentile (the child's weight range compared to other children of the same age and gender). This allowed ORC to determine how many of these children were actually obese, overweight, at a normal weight or underweight and to compare the perceptions and actions of the mothers based on their child's BMI. Using this methodology, the survey reveals important differences in how moms with overweight children compare with moms whose children are at a healthy weight when it comes to combating childhood obesity.

The following is a summary of the survey findings:

- 1. Slightly more than one in three of the school-aged children assessed in this study are either overweight or obese, a figure that corresponds with government estimates for childhood obesity nationwide.**
 - Based on information the mothers provided about the height, weight, age and gender of their youngest child, 34 percent of the children meet the criteria for overweight or obese (the child's BMI meets or exceeds the 85th percentile on the CDC growth charts for children of that age and gender).
 - Of these overweight children, slightly more are boys (55%) than girls (45%).
 - Almost one in five of the mothers surveyed (18%) has a child with a BMI in the obese range (at or above the 95th percentile on the CDC growth chart). Of these obese children, 45 percent are boys and 55 percent are girls.
- 2. Many mothers of overweight or obese children mistakenly believe their child is at a healthy weight and, thus, are not taking some simple steps to improve the child's weight status.**
 - Three in four moms (76%) whose child is classified as overweight mistakenly believe the child is at a healthy weight.
 - Among the 18 percent of moms whose children meet the criteria for obesity, only 2 percent agree with this classification. In contrast, 59 percent perceive their child as being merely overweight and more than a third (36%) consider their child as being at a healthy weight.
- 3. Even though pediatricians and family doctors now assess the height and weight of the children they see on a routine basis, many parents are still not having a candid conversation with these physicians about their children's weight status.**
 - In February 2010, the American Academy of Pediatrics pledged that pediatricians nationwide would begin calculating the BMI for every child at every "well-child" visit and, according to the ORC survey, these efforts are paying off. Virtually all the

moms polled (96%) report the family pediatrician regularly measures the child's height and weight – both of which are needed to calculate a child's BMI and plot the child's BMI Percentile on a growth chart.

- But despite this positive development, just half of the moms surveyed (52%) say they talk to the pediatrician about their child's weight status.
- When the mom perceives her child to be at an unhealthy weight, this number rises to 70 percent. But that still leaves almost one in three moms (30%) who know their child has a weight problem and yet are not discussing this issue with the child's physician.
- Moreover, these findings do not account for the moms who mistakenly believe their child is at a healthy weight and, therefore, are not initiating a discussion with the child's pediatrician.

4. Overweight and obese children are the least likely to get the amount of daily physical activity needed for a healthy weight and optimal growth.

- Although experts recommend that children get 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity every day for optimal health, 65 percent of the children who are actually classified as obese in this study get a moderate (between 30 minutes to an hour of physical activity a day) or low level (less than 30 minutes a day) of physical activity each week.
- In addition, only 26 percent of the moms who say their child has a weight problem report high or very high levels (up to 2 hours a day) of physical activity for this child. This is in contrast to 58 percent of the moms who rate their child as being at a healthy weight.

5. Parents significantly underestimate the amount of time their children spend in sedentary activities.

- According to First Lady Michelle Obama's *Let's Move!* Campaign to combat childhood obesity, the average American child spends more than 7.5 hours a day watching TV and movies, using cell phones and computers for entertainment, and playing video games.⁶ However, only one in four of the moms polled think their youngest child spends too much time watching television and DVDs (26%) or spends too much time playing on the computer (24%).
- These numbers go up when moms believe their child has a weight problem. Three in five of these moms (60%) worry their child spends too much time watching television, while 44 percent say their child spends too much time playing computer games.

⁶ Lets.move.gov; <http://www.letsmove.gov/learnthefacts.php>

6. At the same time, many parents have a false sense of security that their children are getting enough physical activity.

- Although there has been a significant decline in children's physical activity levels -- 2007 data from CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System finds two-thirds of adolescents do not get the amount of physical activity recommended for optimal growth⁷ -- 53 percent of the moms surveyed believe their child gets a high or very high level of physical activity (more than one hour a day).
- Another third (34%) of the moms polled say their child regularly gets between 30 minutes to an hour of physical activity a day, which is considered a moderate level. Only 13 percent say their child gets less than 30 minutes of activity a day, which is considered a low level.
- One of the reasons parents tend to overestimate their children's activity levels is the mistaken belief that parents know how much activity their kids are getting. This is especially the case when parents perceive their child as being at a healthy weight. In this survey, more than 80 percent of the moms who believe their child is at a healthy weight say they know how much physical activity the child gets at school (81%) and after school (80%).
- Perhaps due to these misperceptions, only 20 percent of the moms surveyed stated an interest in learning how to get their child more physically active. This number jumps to 45 percent among the moms who perceive their child as overweight or obese. What this suggests is that the vast majority of moms are not actively looking for ways to increase the activity levels of their children at a time when parental intervention is essential to reducing obesity in their families.

7. Moms face significant challenges when trying to reduce the fat and calories in family meals.

- When asked "what is the biggest obstacle you face when serving your family more nutritious foods," 39 percent cite having children who are picky eaters and only like certain foods. This challenge applies to all moms, regardless of their perceptions of their children's weight status.
- In addition to family taste preferences, one in four of the moms surveyed believe serving more nutritious meals "takes a lot more time to prepare" (26%) or requires ingredients that are "often more expensive" (25%).

⁷ Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance --2007, Morbidity & Mortality Weekly Report, June 6, 2008; 57(S S04); 1-131

8. Making sure children eat a healthy lunch and more nutritious snacks are two ways moms can manage their children's weight status.

- More than half of the school-aged children get their lunch at school – 55 percent according to the moms polled. Of the meals served at school, moms report that pizza is by far their child's favorite meal (32%). Sandwiches (18%) and chicken (15%) are also popular items while fruit, vegetables and salads are only mentioned by 13 percent of the moms.
- Among the more than four in 10 moms (44%) who regularly pack their child's school lunch, the survey finds many opportunities for moms to improve the nutritional quality of the lunches their children eat. One option is to change the ingredients to reduce the amount of fat and calories in the child's sandwich, which according to the majority of moms (61%) is their child's favorite option when kids take their lunch to school.
- Moms can also opt for more fruit and vegetable items and fewer snack foods. Here, only one in four moms say they regularly pack fruit, vegetables and salad items (23%) in their child's school lunch, but many also include a number of snack and dessert items that are high in fat and calories, such as chips, crackers and cookies (24%).
- When it comes to after-school snacks, moms say candy, cookies, crackers and snack cakes are what their children request most frequently (39%).
- However, one in four moms (28%) say their children enjoy fruits and vegetables as snacks, which suggests that if moms learn how to prepare healthier snacks their children will eat them.

9. The survey provides new evidence that many parents are not using calorie information on menus when going to fast-food outlets and restaurant chains.

- In anticipation of a new federal requirement (under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010) that fast-food and chain restaurants post calorie information on menus and menu boards, a number of restaurant chains are starting to provide this information to consumers. However, the survey finds most parents either don't take advantage of or don't have access to calorie information when taking the family out to eat.
- Of the 500 moms surveyed, 56 percent admit not looking for calorie information on restaurant menus, while another 21 percent say they are not able to find calorie information posted in the restaurants they frequent.
- Only 23 percent of moms say they usually look for calorie information on restaurant menus.

Methodology

The ORC International survey was conducted online between March 10 and March 14, 2011, using a self-administered questionnaire to assess the attitudes and beliefs of 500 mothers with children ages 6 to 16 years. Each respondent was asked to provide the birth date, height, age and gender of her youngest child. This information was entered into a BMI Percentile Calculator tool for school children downloaded from the CDC website to determine the weight category for each child. With this information, ORC was able to assess the perceptions, concerns and actions of moms whose children are classified as overweight and obese. The survey also polled mothers about their understanding of childhood obesity and the steps they are taking to address this issue within their family.

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