Fat kids a major national concern
Little exercise, poor diet culprits

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DURHAM – One in three children ages 2-19 are overweight or obese in the United States, and the American Heart Association says almost none meet healthy diet and physical activity recommendations.

French fries are the most common vegetable children eat, making up 25 percent of their total vegetable intake. Juice accounts for 40 percent of their daily fruit intake. The problem? French fries are potatoes (a starch and non-complex carbohydrate) that are fried in oil, and juice lacks fiber found in natural fruit, plus excessive amounts of additional sugar.

Obesity in America is literally costing a hefty price of $147 billion, and health leaders are striving to generate change. Voices for Healthy Kids is a combined effort of the American Heart Association and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation aimed at taking action to prevent childhood obesity.

"It's working to create environments that support health so that all young people across the country can eat healthier, be more active, and hopefully avoid our nation's No. 1 killer - cardiovascular disease," said Peg O'Connell, senior advisor for government and legislative affairs for Fuquay Solutions. O'Connell has worked with the AHA for years.

Obesity is more than a superficial problem, but a real risk to one's health. It is linked to more chronic conditions than smoking, poverty and drinking. O'Connell said we are looking at a generation that may die sooner than their parents did. The risk factors are significant and the problem is hard to tackle when there are causes from all sides – whether environmental, socio-economical or cultural.

Take for instance the culture of the typical American kid. This includes fast food runs and lots of screen time in front of the TV, using computers and cell phones, and playing video games. Between 40 percent and 50 percent of toddlers ages 12-35 months watch more television than is recommended.

Marketing and advertising of high-calorie, unhealthy foods to children are also linked to childhood obesity. McDonald's is one of the largest marketers of toys (for the Happy Meal) in the world.

A report from the Federal Trade Commission revealed that the food industry spent nearly $1.8 billion in 2009 marketing and advertising foods and beverages to children. The top three sources were fast food, carbonated beverages and breakfast cereals.

Also hindering a healthier lifestyle for families and their children, especially in poorer neighborhoods, is a lack of access to both healthy food choices and places of outdoor recreation like parks and walkable sidewalks.

"Lower income communities often have fewer resources to support active lifestyles and safe places to play and exercise. These same communities usually have fewer food choices (as well). Limited transportation can (also) make grocery shopping very complicated," O'Connell said.

North Carolina has at least 349 food deserts, and it's not only happening in rural counties but also in urban areas like Durham, Winston-Salem and Greensboro. Greensboro is the most food-insecure metropolitan area in the United States.

Families who live in these areas must rely on neighborhood corner stores or quick-stop convenience stores for food purchases, which oftentimes do not offer fresh fruits and vegetables, low-fat dairy products and lean meats.

Rep. Yvonne Holley (D-Wake) became especially concerned for the residents of Southeast Raleigh after Kroger stores left the area, leaving people to drive miles to get to the nearest grocery store. She, along with the AHA and other groups, support the Healthy Corner Store Initiative bills that are in both the House and Senate, which would appropriate $1 million for such use.
“Smaller convenience stores tend to be located in areas that have less access to grocery stores, making them great places to increase healthy and local products. A state-supported Healthy Corner Store Initiative would combat the food access problem in North Carolina by helping small convenience and corner store owners stock healthy foods, some of which could come from local farmers and fishermen,” the N.C. Alliance for Health website stated.

Children who eat healthy foods and get daily physical activity have fewer school absences, higher academic achievement, higher self-esteem and fewer behavioral problems.

“There is no single solution to childhood obesity. Reversing the epidemic means changing the policies and environments that fuel the epidemic,” Voices for Healthy Kids stated. “We are committed to making the healthy choice the easy choice.”

For more information, visit www.heart/org/healthierkids.