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Obesity Hurts Kids' Lifestyles Like Cancer, Study Finds

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From teasing by their classmates to difficulty walking more than a block, severely obese children exhibit a quality of life as bad as that of children undergoing chemotherapy, according to a study published today in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

The striking finding comes as obesity, both in children and adults, has reached alarming levels in the United States. JAMA devoted its entire issue today to the topic.

"Chemotherapy can be very brutal," said Joseph Skelton, a pediatrician at Children's Hospital of Wisconsin who is familiar with the JAMA study - though not connected with it.

But obesity throws its own set of problems at children, ranging from depression to sleep apnea so bad that they need devices to help them breathe at night, said Skelton, who is setting up an obesity treatment program at the hospital.

In addition to having difficulty with exercise and sleeping, obese kids also can suffer from a variety of other ailments, including diabetes, fatty liver disease and elevated cholesterol levels.

Testing quality of life

It long has been believed that among children with chronic health problems, cancer caused the most significant impairment in emotional, social and physical quality of life.

But today's study suggests that obese kids may have it just as bad, if not worse.

Using a standard, 23-question pediatric test that assesses quality of life, the study compared the scores of 106 obese children, ages 5 to 18, with those of 401 normal-weight children and 106 children who had been diagnosed with cancer.

The test looked at a variety of measures such as levels of aches and pain; feeling afraid or worried; difficulty getting along with other kids; and missing school. The researchers also compared the responses of the parents of the children.

The study found that the obese kids were 5.5 times more likely to have a significantly impaired quality of life than normal-weight kids. Their scores were similar to the scores of kids with cancer, although by several measures the obese kids actually had slightly greater problems than the children with cancer.

The average score on the 100-point test was 67 for the obese children, compared with 83 for the normal-weight children. The study said the obese children's scores were similar to previously published quality of life scores for the children and adolescents diagnosed with cancer.

The findings are "frightening," said Randy Clark, an exercise physiologist who works with obese kids in the Pediatric Fitness Clinic at the University of Wisconsin Hospital and Clinics Sports Medicine Center in Madison.

"(For) kids going through chemotherapy, it's a very uncomfortable time, physically and emotionally," he said. "The fact that these obese kids rate themselves the same way is shocking."

Emotional impairment

Even without known physical conditions, the obese kids reported a poor quality of life.

For instance, they were 4.3 times more likely to have emotional impairment when compared with normal-weight kids and 5.3 times more likely to have problems at school.

"We expected obese kids to have a lower quality of life," said Jeffrey Schwimmer, the study's lead author and a pediatric gastroenterologist at the University of California, San Diego. "We were surprised at how much lower."

On average, the obese children missed four days of school a month, compared with one for normal-weight children, he said.

"For some children, the teasing they experienced was so bad, it made going to school very difficult," he said.

But ridicule from classmates may be only one reason why obese children miss more school.

Schwimmer said some research suggests that obese children have higher levels of inflammation in their bodies, which, in turn, could make them more susceptible to conditions such as fever and fatigue.

About 15% of U.S. children are obese, a percentage that has nearly tripled since the 1970s. For children, obesity is defined as having a body mass index greater than the 95th percentile of a standard for children set in the late 1960s. Body mass index is a formula that compares a person's height with the person's weight.

Child obesity experts said the study should open eyes in the medical community.

Indeed, Skelton, of Children's Hospital, said many physicians now are changing their perspective on childhood obesity and coming to realize its far-ranging health implications.

"It's a disease much like cancer that kids have to live with and may have to live with for the rest of their life," he said.

An editorial accompanying the study concluded, "It seems clear that one of the most compelling medical challenges of the 21st century is to develop effective strategies to prevent and treat pediatric obesity."

Drug study

In a related matter, another study in JAMA found that giving obese children, ages 13 to 17, the prescription weight-loss drug sibutramine (Meridia), along with behavioral therapy, resulted in significantly more weight loss over six months than behavioral therapy and a placebo.

However, giving children diet drugs is controversial. The authors of the study said that until more safety and efficacy data become available, weight-loss medications should be given to children only on an experimental basis.

That study was co-sponsored by Abbott Laboratories and Knoll Pharmaceutical Co., which make the drug.