CHILDHOOD OBESITY: THE FACTS

What’s the problem?

Children are larger than ever before.

This has been one of the most worrying health trends in the last decade which has seen rates of children being overweight/obese rise to 22 per cent in boys and 17 per cent in girls in Wales. Between 1996 and 2001 the UK proportion of overweight children increased by 7 per cent and obese children by 3.5 per cent.

Whose problem is it?

The problems of childhood obesity are beginning to affect society as a whole. If the current trend of childhood obesity continues to rise, 1 in 4 people in the UK will be obese by 2010.

Obese people are more likely to suffer from diseases such as Diabetes, high blood pressure and coronary heart disease which presents a massive drain on NHS resources. Every year £500 million is spent in the UK on treating obesity and related problems.

Why is it on the rise?

Obesity is preventable by leading an active lifestyle and eating a healthy balanced diet.

Sedentary Behaviour:

There is no doubt that children - and adults - are larger than 50 years ago. Some theories attribute this rise to the increase in sedentary lifestyles that many of us now lead. We are less active today than our grandparents due to all the creature comforts of modern living such as high car usage, internet shopping, take-away food and television.

Television:

The advertising of junk foods on television has also been blamed for the rise in childhood obesity. Children spend on average two and a half months per year in front of the television, and advertisements for foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt specifically targeting children leads to a culture of unhealthy food choices being branded as ‘cool’.
Cultural Change:

Undoubtedly, a cultural change needs to take place. A recent Ofcom Consultation on the relationship between advertising and childhood obesity has made recommendations to ban the advertising of foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt during programmes aimed at pre-school children and limit the time given to advertisers of these products and their appeal during programmes aimed at children up to 9 years old.

In response to this consultation, organisations such as the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and the National Heart Forum have called for a 9pm watershed on advertisements for foods that are high in fat, sugar and salt.

The Wales Centre for Health is publicly declaring its support of the FSA’s response to the Ofcom Consultation which attempts to make a real change to the problem of childhood obesity.

Professor Mansel Aylward CB, Chair of Wales Centre for Health, believes advertisers must take more responsibility for their actions:

“The Wales Centre for Health is in complete agreement with the FSA and others that children are encouraged, through clever advertising, to indulge in foods that are high in sugar, fat and salt. If we are to halt the growing trend in childhood obesity then we must protect the younger generation from attractive advertising which is detrimental to their health.

It’s a pity that in our current culture of excess we can’t exercise more moderation. Therefore, I believe that the limiting of junk food advertisements is the only course of action left to those of us campaigning for better health messages to the young.”

For more information visit www.eatwell.gov.uk