Today, more people are overweight than ever before. Experts are calling this an “obesity epidemic.” The growing rate of children and teens that are overweight in the United States is especially alarming. Since the 1980s, the percentage of overweight children and teens has more than tripled. In fact, one third of all children and teens between the ages of two and nineteen are overweight or obese.

What’s more, children and teens are now developing health problems—such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and Type 2 diabetes—that only used to affect adults. But being overweight can also affect a person’s joints, breathing, sleep, mood, and energy levels. Being overweight can have far-reaching effects on a person’s quality of life.

**Defining Overweight**

When a person continues a pattern of eating more calories than he or she burns off in physical activity, fat builds up in the body. Eventually, the body gets to a point where the amount of body fat causes health problems. Doctors use the terms **overweight** or **obese** to describe someone at greatest risk of developing weight-related health problems.

**Why Do People Become Overweight?**

Obesity tends to run in families. Some people have a genetic tendency to gain weight more easily than others because they burn calories more slowly. Although genes strongly influence body type and size, the environment also plays a role. High-calorie, low-nutrient snacks and beverages, fast food, and bigger portions of food are all contributing to the obesity epidemic.

Sometimes people turn to food for emotional reasons, such as when they feel upset, anxious, sad, stressed out, or even bored. When this happens, they often eat more than they need. And they tend to eat the kinds foods that are packed with calories and short on nutrients.

Our high-tech lifestyles also play a part in adding the pounds. People rarely walk as a means of transportation. They’ll hop into a car to go just a few blocks. Hours spent sitting in front of the computer or TV playing video games or watching movies means fewer calories burned off in physical activity, such as sports.

**Health Problems and Being Overweight**

Being overweight or obese can affect a person’s health in many ways. The health problems that can affect overweight kids and teens include:

- Arthritis—wear and tear on the joints from carrying extra weight can cause this painful joint problem even at a young age.
Asthma—obesity is associated with breathing problems that can make all physical activity difficult, from playing sports to walking from class to class.

Blount’s disease—excess weight on growing bones can lead to bone deformity of the lower legs.

Depression—kids and teens who are obese are more likely to develop depression, have lower self-esteem, and to be the victims of bullying than their normal-weight peers.

Fatty liver—an accumulation of fat in the liver can cause inflammation, scarring, and permanent liver damage.

Gallstones—an accumulation of bile that hardens in the gallbladder may become painful and require surgery.

High blood pressure—over a long period of time, this condition can cause stress on the heart and arteries.

High cholesterol—increases the risk of heart attack and stroke when a person gets older.

Insulin resistance and diabetes—excess body fat interferes with insulin's ability to get glucose, the body’s main source of energy, into cells. More insulin is then needed to maintain normal blood sugar levels. For some overweight teens, insulin resistance may progress to diabetes (high blood sugar).

Pseudotumor cerebri—pressure that builds in the brain may cause severe headaches, vomiting, an unsteady walk, and vision problems that could become permanent if not treated.

Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)—girls may miss periods, or not get their periods at all, and may have elevated levels of testosterone (the male hormone) in the blood. Too much testosterone may also cause excess hair growth, worsening acne, and male-type baldness. PCOS is associated with insulin resistance, a precursor to developing Type 2 diabetes. Women who are overweight can develop fertility problems.

Sleep apnea—this condition (where a person temporarily stops breathing during sleep) can leave a teen feeling tired, affect the ability to concentrate and learn, and may lead to heart problems.

Sources

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.  www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/ and Website links

