

Fight obesity, chronic disease for health reform

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By Tamara Martin

We need to address the connections between obesity and chronic disease and the effect they have on the growing number of overweight children in our nation.

In President Obama's recent address to the nation, he clearly stated that health care reform was a key to our economic recovery and long-term viability. We at the New Hampshire Action for Healthy Kids strongly believe the concern for our children's health and the future health of this country lies in the hands of our state representatives, Sens. Gregg and Shaheen, and Congresswoman Shea-Porter and Congressman Hodes. It is imperative that they work for a stronger health care system so that our nation can fight against obesity with more success.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention connects coronary heart disease, type 2 diabetes, cancers (endometrial, breast, and colon), high blood pressure, stroke, liver, and gallbladder disease, sleep apnea, respiratory problems, steoarthritis, and gynecological problems to obesity. We need to help prevent our children from dealing with chronic diseases through actions taken right now.

The Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease notes that young Americans are suffering from preventable diseases at higher rates and the best way to continually improve health status would be to practice preventative measures. It is important that our nation adopt systems for fitness and execute these plans to ensure a healthier outlook.

Here at New Hampshire Action for Healthy Kids we have produced plans for school systems and parents to ensure that a healthy diet and daily exercise are natural parts of a child's life.

Studies have shown that 90 percent of school superintendents and 80 percent of school nutrition professionals are satisfied with the variety and amount of health food options they provide children. Others report that this is not the case. In reality, for the majority of schools to do a satisfactory job of limiting the amount of junk food allowed and providing a variety of healthy, youth-appealing food options, parents and teachers must participate in the learning process by modeling and encouraging healthy food behaviors.

Similarly, half of the nation's school principals and superintendents believe that their schools offer satisfactory physical education classes, where 80 percent of physical education teachers and 70 percent of parents and students feel that there is not enough attention paid to children's physical activity. Only 2 percent of the nation's high schools have their students partake in gym class every day, and just 4 percent of elementary schools have daily physical education.

Chronic disease is a very real threat to overweight people, and we cannot allow for their chance of disease to be increased when it is so easily preventable. According to the Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease, chronic illnesses are the number one cause of death in our country, taking up 75 percent of all health care costs. If our new president wants to help our nation from unnecessary spending while also focusing his attentions on our health, reforming our children's diet and exercise as offered by their schools is necessary.

At New Hampshire Action for Healthy Kids, we also ask that parents take responsibility for what they

provide their own children and look to their state representatives to voice their concerns. Studies have reported that over 60 percent of all school related groups, including 72 percent of parents themselves, disagree that most parents encourage their children to consume healthful foods and beverages. The Partnership to Fight Chronic Disease notes that much of the prevention of chronic disease comes from taking the initiative to educate oneself on healthy practices and to carry them on to later generations.

Obesity is a problem that our nation is facing as a whole and the cost it can have once it leads to chronic disease can be debilitating. It is essential that New Hampshire's schools, families and government all join together against the spread of obesity and chronic disease. If we can lower obesity rates we can also lower the amount of money our nation spends treating individuals who could have been spared. We must ask that health care reform recognize the threat of chronic disease and do all that we can in order to decrease the staggering number of people suffering needlessly.

Tamara Martin is chairwoman of New Hampshire Action for Healthy Kids.