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Childhood obesity: A lifetime of danger

By Nanci Hellmich, USA TODAY

Scientists are serving up extra helpings of research these days showing why parents must keep an eye on their children's weight.

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Experts have known for years that hauling around extra pounds takes a huge toll on children's health, putting them at an increased risk for type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol and other health problems. The latest evidence reveals how profoundly damaging those pounds can be:

- Excess body weight in children dramatically increases their risk of developing heart disease in adulthood, research shows, including a decades-long study in Denmark that tracked what happened to 277,000 children as they grew up.
- Childhood obesity could decrease life expectancy by two to five years if something isn't done about the epidemic, according to provocative research by pediatric endocrinologist David Ludwig, an associate professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School.
- One in three obese children have excess fat in their liver, which could lead to hepatitis, cirrhosis or liver failure, Ludwig says.

About one-third of children and teens in the USA — about 25 million children — are overweight or on the brink of becoming so, government data show.

"Obesity affects every organ system in a child's body, and it can do so in a much more profound way than in adults because children are still growing and developing," Ludwig says.

Others agree that the health consequences can be devastating.

Obesity in childhood can increase the risk of type 2 diabetes in both childhood and adulthood, and it can lead to sleep apnea in children, says William Dietz of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Sleep apnea is when breathing is interrupted repeatedly, disrupting the quality of sleep and leading to daytime fatigue.

Daniel Jones, president of the American Heart Association and dean of the School of

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Medicine at the University of Mississippi in Jackson, says: "If something isn't done about the current childhood obesity epidemic, many of these kids will be at a higher risk of dying in middle age of heart disease and stroke. The American Heart Association is trying to stem the epidemic before it becomes a renewed epidemic of heart disease."

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The heart association is working to make sure that children get enough physical education and more nutritious foods in schools, Jones says. And parents need to help their children "make wise choices about their health so that they live long, healthy and productive lives."

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