

Let's get kids walking toward healthy habits

We've got a real problem in the United States: Both adult and childhood obesity have become major health issues.

The good news is we've become increasingly aware of what's been happening over the last decade or two. The bad news is the problem is so big that our solutions and remedies have been minimal and not very effective.

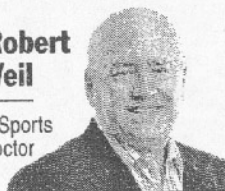
This is a topic I've stressed on the "Sports Doctor" radio show for more than 10 years. Just how big is the problem? Well, for starters, obesity has tripled among children ages 6 to 19, and adults don't fare much better. One of the largest studies of its kind shows that 90 percent of 9-year-olds get a couple of hours of exercise most days, but fewer than 3 percent of 15-year-olds do.

This sharp drop of activity levels raises alarms about the lack of physical activity continuing into adulthood, with all its significant health risks - including heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure.

"People still don't recognize this as the crisis that it is," wrote Dr. Philip Nader, the study's author and a pediatrician and professor at

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the University of California at San Diego.

This study came about a week after a pediatric group recommended consideration of using cholesterol-lowering drugs in children as young as 8 years old. What the heck is going on here?

Sun fitness columnist Nicki Anderson recently quoted a study that said "treating children with obesity is three times more costly than the average child." Calculate that with these huge numbers and you'll arrive at the scary fact that this crisis can break us financially as a society. Health care costs for all this will be impossible.

Also, adults without children who think this doesn't affect them must understand that health insurance costs will reflect lifelong obesity-related illnesses.

Of course, we know nutrition and eating habits are the other part of this two-headed monster. The

fast food industry has buried us with advertising over the last few decades. Even the "regular food industry," with its processed foods and ingredients with long shelf lives, hasn't done us any favors.

It's not a secret - we eat too much and don't include enough fruits, vegetables and food that's nutritious. We've got to pay attention to this. This is included in any solution, whether it's for kids or adults.

Chicago Sun Times columnist Sue Ontiveros is on target with her recent mention of "needing to get kids biking, swimming, walking, things that don't require teammates." She, like me, deplores the short-sighted decisions to cut back daily gym classes by our legislators. She includes in a recent column how schools convinced us that "recess is a waste of time, our students need to be in class instead."

Well, here's where my solution: let's get them walking.

It's a simple, national school initiative: all kindergartners through 12th-graders who are physically able should do a 30-minute fitness walk every day. No special equipment, no com-

petition, indoors or outside. Just do it.

The walking doesn't have to replace other physical activities, but it would be the norm - a 15- or 20-minute health-related topic could round out the rest of the time period, if time allows.

The daily walks would not affect team sports and school athletes. This would stay the same, but all athletes should participate. It's for everyone.

Starting this habit of everyday walking in early childhood and continuing it through high school would dramatically change the mess we're in over the next generation. Chances are good that this habit would continue throughout adulthood and influence the parents of the kids who participate as well.

So, school officials, parents, coaches and legislators, let's get them walking. It will work!

Comment at napersun.com

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