

Hefty Kids Have Higher Risk of Future Heart Attack

LONDON (Reuters) - Overweight children are three to five times more likely to suffer a heart attack or stroke before they reach 65 than slimmer youngsters, an international charity said Monday.

Diseases previously seen only in adults are now being diagnosed in hefty children, who are likely to also be overweight or obese as adults.

"Overweight and obese children bear near-term risks of developing type 2 diabetes, and ill health, heart attack or stroke before they are 65," said Janet Voute, the chief executive officer of the Geneva-based World Heart Federation.

The federation issued the warning ahead of World Heart Day on September 26, which is focusing on children, adolescents and heart disease.

Unhealthy lifestyles including high-calorie diets, dwindling exercise and hours spent in front of the television or computer have contributed to a surge in childhood obesity.

Voute hopes that, by making the link between children and heart disease and by showing how poor diet and lack of exercise in youth contribute to it, people will be shocked into doing something about it.

An estimated 10 percent of children, or at least 155 million youngsters worldwide, are overweight or obese, according to a report by the London-based International Obesity Task Force (IOTF).

"We must protect children from an environment that leads to heart disease by teaching life-long healthy eating habits and limiting exposure to unhealthy food," said Sania Nishtar, chair of the federation's advisory board.

Voute believes parents, children and adolescents do not fully realize that the habits adopted at a young age could lead to health problems in adulthood.

"Lifestyle habits are set early and that is why the World Heart Federation is calling attention to that issue," she told Reuters.

Voute called for a revamp of nutrition in schools, including a rethink of what is served in cafeterias and sold in vending machines. Policy makers also need to increase physical activities in schools.

The federation also warned that tobacco is threatening the health of children's hearts.

Globally nearly 25 percent of students smoke and half of children worldwide are subjected to passive smoking by living with a smoker.

Children regularly exposed to second-hand smoke have a 25 percent increased risk of both lung cancer and heart disease and an 80 percent raised risk of stroke, according to the federation.