

## Chef Wendell's: What causes obesity?

Childhood obesity is the result of eating too many low-grade calories and not enough physical activity. It can be difficult for children to make healthy food choices and get enough physical activity when they are exposed to parents eating habits, child care center, school, or community that are influenced by—

- **Sugar drinks and less healthy foods on school campuses.** About 55 million school-aged children are enrolled in schools across the United States,<sup>1</sup> and many eat and drink meals and snacks there. Yet, more than half of U.S. middle and high schools still offer sugar drinks and less healthy foods for purchase. Students have access to sugar drinks and less healthy foods at school throughout the day from vending machines and school canteens and at fundraising events, school parties, and sporting events.
- **Advertising of less healthy foods.** Nearly half of U.S. middle and high schools allow advertising of less healthy foods, which impacts students' ability to make healthy food choices. In addition, foods high in total calories, sugars, salt, and fat, and low in nutrients are highly advertised and marketed through media targeted to children and adolescents,<sup>3</sup> while advertising for healthier foods is almost nonexistent in comparison.
- **Variation in licensure regulations among child care centers.** More than 12 million children regularly spend time in child care arrangements outside the home. However, not all states use licensing regulations to ensure that child care facilities encourage more healthful eating and physical activity.
- **Lack of daily, quality physical activity in all schools.** Most adolescents fall short of the *2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* recommendation of at least 60 minutes of aerobic physical activity each day, as only 18% of students in grades 9—12 met this recommendation in 2007. Daily, quality physical education in school can help students meet the *Guidelines*. However, in 2009 only 33% attended daily physical education classes.
- **No safe and appealing place, in many communities, to play or be active.** Many communities are built in ways that make it difficult or unsafe to be physically active. For some families, getting to parks and recreation centers may be difficult, and public transportation may not be available. For many children, safe routes for walking or biking to school or play may not exist. Half of the children in the United States do not have a park, community center, and sidewalk in their neighborhood. Only 27 states have policies directing community-scale design.
- **Limited access to healthy affordable foods.** Some people have less access to stores and supermarkets that sell healthy, affordable food such as fruits and vegetables, especially in rural, minority, and lower-income neighborhoods. Supermarket access is associated with a reduced risk for obesity. Choosing healthy foods is difficult for parents who live in areas with an overabundance of food retailers that tend to sell less healthy food, such as convenience stores and fast food restaurants.

- **Greater availability of high-energy-dense foods and sugar drinks.** High-energy-dense foods are ones that have a lot of calories in each bite. A recent study among children showed that a high-energy-dense diet is associated with a higher risk for excess body fat during childhood. Sugar drinks are the largest source of added sugar and an important contributor of calories in the diets of children in the United States. High consumption of sugar drinks, which have few, if any, nutrients, has been associated with obesity.<sup>13</sup> On a typical day, 80% of youth drink sugar drinks.
- **Increasing portion sizes.** Portion sizes of less healthy foods and beverages have increased over time in restaurants, grocery stores, and vending machines. Research shows that children eat more without realizing it if they are served larger portions. This can mean they are consuming a lot of extra calories, especially when eating high-calorie foods.
- **Lack of breastfeeding support.** Breastfeeding protects against childhood overweight and obesity. However, in the United States, while 75% of mothers start out breastfeeding, only 13% of babies are exclusively breastfed at the end of 6 months. The success rate among mothers who want to breastfeed can be improved through active support from their families, friends, communities, clinicians, health care leaders, employers, and policymakers.
- **Television and media.** Children 8—18 years of age spend an average of 7.5 hours a day using entertainment media, including TV, computers, video games, cell phones, and movies. Of those 7.5 hours, about 4.5 hours is dedicated to viewing TV. Eighty-three percent of children from 6 months to less than 6 years of age view TV or videos about 1 hour and 57 minutes a day. TV viewing is a contributing factor to childhood obesity because it may take away from the time children spend in physical activities; lead to increased energy intake through snacking and eating meals in front of the TV; and, influence children to make unhealthy food choices through exposure to food advertisements.