



1 in 5 young children considered obese

By Kim Lamb Gregory
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There's good news and bad news about the number of obese children in Ventura County. The good news, according to Santa Paula pediatrician Dr. Heather Nichols, is the percentage of obese children has remained relatively steady: 42.7 percent in 2006, dipping slightly to 42.2 percent in 2007. The bad news?

“Those numbers are still way too high,” Nichols said. “It should be 15 percent or lower.”

Nichols spoke Tuesday at the Ventura County Government Center on childhood obesity prevention as part of National Public Health Week. She was one of four members on a panel sponsored by Ventura County Public Health.

The forum was held on the same day that a troubling study on obesity was released by Ohio State University public health researcher Sarah Anderson and Temple University's Dr. Robert Whitaker. The study, which followed 8,550 preschoolers, showed one in five American 4-year-olds is obese.

Children were considered obese if their body-mass index, a height-weight ratio, was in the 95th percentile or higher based on government BMI growth charts. For 4-year-olds, that would be a BMI of about 18. For example, a girl who is 4 1/2 years old, 40 inches tall and 42 pounds would have a BMI of about 18, weighing 4 pounds more than the government's upper limit for that age, height and gender.

Dr. Robert Levin, public health officer for Ventura County, moderated the forum that was attended by about 70 people. The other members of the panel were: Claud Mann, a certified professional chef from Ojai; Linda Kodman, a registered dietitian from the Ventura County Health Care Agency, and Dr. Steven Loy, an exercise physiologist from CSU Northridge.

Mann said there are a number of reasons for the obesity crisis among kids

“It's like a perfect storm for obesity,” Mann said. “Technology, as it's ramped up, means people are less and less active. Most parents think they're too busy to cook,

and a lot of P.E. programs aren't happening.”

The problem is particularly pronounced among poorer populations, Levin said.

“Poverty directly correlates with obesity,” Levin said, adding that statistics from the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health showed a 4 percent child obesity rate in wealthier cities such as Manhattan Beach, versus 37 percent in Maywood, a much poorer city.

“They do not have grocery stores with fresh food, they have convenience stores and fast food stores,” Levin said of poorer neighborhoods.

The answer to the problem is nothing new: Kids need to eat five fruits and vegetables a day, get an hour of daily exercise, and stay away from sugary drinks and juices, the panel members said. Mann suggested kids drink more water.

Loy recommended turning off the TV during the week and Nichols suggested kids have no more than two hours of computer and/or TV screen time a night. Instead, they need to play, preferably outside, she said.

Kodman stressed the need to invest in exercise and nutrition curriculums for children, because if we don't pay for it now, we'll pay for it later in soaring health costs.

“We repaint our world with every dollar we spend,” she said.

— *The Associated Press contributed to this report*



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