

Fighting Childhood Obesity: Going Back To The Garden For A “Rainbow Of Color”

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ORLANDO, FL (2003) – ORLANDO, FL (2003) – There is a crisis of childhood obesity with excessive body weight currently constituting the most common pediatric medical problem in this country. To combat this situation, the National Watermelon Promotion Board (NWPB) nutritional expert and watermelon advocate, Dr. Barbara Levine, co-director of the nutrition program at Rockefeller University, New York, has examined the situation and recommends a practical approach to assist parents in helping their children to eat more nutritiously and live healthier lives.

A study published in the journal *The Lancet*, an international journal of medical science and practice, in February 2001, shows that the prevalence of obesity among children in the United States increased by a whopping 100% between 1980 and 1994. Further evidence of this burgeoning epidemic is reflected in the latest statistics from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES). The report indicates that an estimated fifteen percent of children and adolescents (almost 9 million) in the United States age 6-19 years are overweight. This figure is triple what the proportion was in 1980. These findings suggest the unfortunate likelihood of another generation of overweight adults who may be at risk for subsequent overweight and obesity-related health conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, and some types of cancer.

“Early intervention with healthy food choices is a key to success,” said Dr. Levine. “Not only do many obese children become obese adults, but children suffering from obesity can have high cholesterol levels, high blood pressure, and diabetes. Overweight and obese children often suffer from depression and societal troubles such as exclusion by peers, poor self-image and low self-esteem. Parents and caregivers can be instrumental in preventing their children from becoming overweight by promoting and reinforcing good food choices and habits. A low-fat, low-calorie diet rich in fruit and vegetables, whole grains, fish, poultry, lean meats and low fat dairy is essential for proper health and development as well as for maintaining a normal weight. Parents should advocate regular exercise and allow children to assist with food shopping and meal preparation,” she added.

Dr. Levine recommends going back to the garden to look for healthy ways to eat. Selecting colorful deep red, yellow, orange, green and blue fruits and vegetables for children will not only make food fun and visually appealing, but will also ensure they receive an ample range of vitamins, minerals, antioxidants, and fiber as well as disease-fighting plant chemicals called phytochemicals. Studies show that a diet rich in phytochemicals may help to reduce the risk of heart disease, strokes, and certain cancers and slow the

aging process and preserve eyesight and brain function.

“Think of filling your shopping cart, refrigerator and plates with a rainbow of color,” said Dr. Levine. “It is beneficial to consume a variety of both deeply pigmented plant foods and less richly colored foods. For example, sweet potatoes offer beta-carotene not found in white potatoes. A potent antioxidant called lycopene may help protect against prostate cancer and possibly heart disease is found in substantial amounts in only a few select plant foods such as watermelon. A red pigment, lycopene neutralizes free radicals, compounds created during photosynthesis. Give children a variety of these colorful foods because phychemicals work together synergistically to confer health protection,” she continued.

In addition to teaching children about the importance of fruits and vegetables, Dr. Levine recommends “educating” their palates by keeping the refrigerator stocked with nutritionally robust snack foods that are colorful, satisfying and healthful rather than high fat, high calorie, nutritionally empty snacks such as cookies, candies, cakes, and chips. “Children will adjust their tastes away from over-sweetened, processed snacks, over time,” said Dr. Levine. Colorful fruit and vegetables are low in fat and calories and are extremely rich in essential vitamins, minerals, and fiber. For example, with almost no fat and only 80 calories, a 2 cup serving of watermelon provides 352 mg of the mineral potassium, 25% of the RDA for the antioxidant vitamin C and 20% of the RDA for vitamin A, 2 grams of dietary fiber, and 1 gram of protein. A snack such as watermelon cubes or sliced watermelon is so healthful that the American Heart Association recently recognized watermelon's nutritional properties by giving it the Heart Check mark.

Dr. Levine’s “Rainbow of Color” Healthy Lifestyle Tips –

-- Plan regular meal and snack times and eat together; eating together helps children learn that eating can be positive, social and enjoyable experience. Eating alone can lead to overeating.

-- Praise your kids when they try new foods that are nutritious. Introduce healthy, new foods when children are most hungry.

-- Serve nutritious snacks in a fun way and have your kids help. For example, allowing them to make their own watermelon balls is a fun way to get your kids to enjoy fruit.

-- Teach your children to read food labels so that you can plan healthy meals and budget your intake of calories and fat over several days. The label tells the total calories in one serving of the food and the number of calories that are coming from fat, and about the different types of fats in the food as well as vitamin and minerals, cholesterol, fiber and sodium.

-- Encourage your children to be active. Exercising together, such as going for walks or playing tennis or other sports, helps reinforce the importance of

regular physical exercise.

-- Serve salty and processed foods only in moderation and avoid adding salt to recipes when possible. Teach your children to look for sodium in the list of ingredients on a food's packaging as well as on the food label.

-- Send your children out on a color-finding mission when you're in the supermarket's produce section. Tell them to create a rainbow in the cart by finding each color fruit and vegetable. Ask them to find red fruits and vegetables and explain why they are good.

-- Don't just serve fruit as a dessert. Add watermelon and other fruit to the meal as side dishes.

-- Create a "rainbow lunch" with colorful foods cut into bite-sized servings.

-- Make smoothies using a variety of colorful fruits such as berries, watermelon, and bananas.

-- Ask your children to suggest healthful lunches, and help you prepare them.

The National Watermelon Promotion Board, based in Orlando, FL represents 2,500 growers, shippers and importers. Through research, communication and marketing initiatives, the Board is finding new ways to enhance market opportunities for farmers and to promote the nutritional, culinary and convenience benefits of watermelon. For additional information on watermelon, please visit our web site at www.watermelon.org.