A Modern Day Health Concern - Childhood Obesity

Childhood Obesity has become a major community health concern over the past thirty years. One in five children is now diagnosed as obese. Obesity and being overweight can lead to many health issues including cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, and diabetes which are also leading causes of death in Illinois. Today’s youth have been gaining an unhealthy amount of weight due to increased food calories and inactivity. Other contributing factors that we sometimes don't acknowledge are the social determinants that lead to poor health, such as poverty, low income neighborhoods, single parent households, and lack of education. Living in an area of poverty can decrease activity because of safety issues, as well as limit access to healthy foods. Research shows that lack of education and lack of income can sway us in choosing healthier foods. Children living in single parent households are also more likely to become obese with indicators showing, not only low income, but lack of activity, limited family meals, and increased intake of fat, calories and sweet drinks.

Public Health plays a big role in changing obesity rates by promoting healthy lifestyle choices. Addressing childhood obesity starts early by way of prevention initiatives. WIC (Women, Infants and Children) programs educate and encourage families on good nutrition and a healthy lifestyle, prenatal health for moms, and breastfeeding after delivery. It's a fact that a healthy mom who chooses to breastfeed will have children that are less likely to become obese. The Farm to School initiative is another early intervention that helps bring local, fresh fruits and vegetables to The School Lunch programs, the Summer Food Service, and Child and Adult Care Food programs. These programs are sometimes the main opportunity children have to access fresh fruits and vegetables.

Creating safe places where children and adults can walk, bicycle, and enjoy outdoor activities is one strategy that Public Health promotes for communities to reduce the risk of obesity. Many children are inactive due to living in unsafe neighborhoods. Invest Health is an example of a local strategic collaboration working toward safer neighborhoods. This group has a variety of organizations in the community focusing on safety and the built environment. They are working toward safer and more accessible neighborhoods to help improve the health of the community.

Public Health also continues in the prevention of obesity through the promotion of breastfeeding. Educating families and moms about the benefits of breastfeeding can give the community the knowledge to make healthier lifestyle choices. WIC services can include a breastfeeding peer counselor to promote breastfeeding to prenatal and postpartum mothers, and hospitals now have breastfeeding specialists to help new moms after they deliver. Studies show that while breastfeeding can reduce a child's risk of obesity, it can also reduce the risk of allergies, heart disease, diabetes, and certain cancers, not to mention savings in medical costs and formula.
The whole community needs to help address and lower the childhood obesity rates by offering more physical activity sites, supporting fresh food access at Farmer's Markets, and providing funding for prevention programs. A healthier weight for children leads to a healthier community.

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