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FSU researcher examines childhood obesity

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Contributing Writer

Florida State University's College of Medicine's Suzanne Johnson was awarded a grant for \$2.2 million from the National Institutes of Health to research and monitor 12 Leon County schools for the next four years in order to examine the impact of school-based wellness programs.

At the beginning and end of each school year the students' height, weight and level of fitness will be recorded.

According to Johnson, the Institutes of Medicine want schools to start screening for obesity in addition to the regular childhood vision, hearing and scoliosis screenings.

"Most children get type one diabetes, which has nothing to do with obesity," said Johnson, department chair in medical humanities and social sciences at the College of Medicine. "About 10 years ago, we began seeing type two diabetes in children. We were all shocked by this, and soon, it became apparent that this was the result of the obesity epidemic in this country."

According to the American Diabetes Association, children are diagnosed with type one diabetes when their bodies no longer produce insulin in order to convert nutrients into energy.

People with type two diabetes either can't produce enough insulin, or the cells in their bodies reject the insulin that is produced.

"Type two diabetes in childhood is a preventable disease," said Johnson. "If we could stop or reverse obesity in Americans, we could stop type two diabetes in children."

Among other factors, the growing number of fast food restaurants, which makes it easier to grab a quick, inexpensive and unhealthy meal on lunch breaks or on the way home from work, means that more people — especially children — are being negatively affected.

Children learn many of their lifestyle habits from their role models. Tanesha Bryant, a single parent of one, tries to make sure her son stays healthy.

"I try to stay away from fast foods as much as possible," said Bryant, a Florida Department of Education employee. "I think this is a great thing. A lot of schools are trying to take away physical education, especially for elementary kids. (The research) will show the benefits of them exercising and having P.E. and learning what's good to eat and what's not good to eat. Hopefully, this research will show that we need more physical education in schools."

Parents need to encourage their children to make healthy choices, according to College of Medicine Dean John P. Fogarty. He also recommended that children spend more time playing outside, as the number of hours of television watched is directly proportional to the likelihood of diabetes. It should be a family effort to get children to be more active.

For the socially and economically disadvantaged populations, Fogarty says there are foods that are not calorie-dense like fresh fruits, vegetables, pasta and beans that can contribute to a nutritional diet.

"We live in a Big Gulp generation, and we live in a super-sized generation," said Fogarty. "Childhood obesity is a huge problem in the United States today, and we're not sure whether we're capturing it or making a difference. What I think Dr. Johnson's work is all about is identifying whether some of the measures the schools and doctor's offices are using are actually making a difference and targeting those children at risk, and whether it's making a difference in lifestyle and fitness."

As of now, it is not definite which schools will participate in the study, but Johnson said they are in the process of getting agreements from principals.

"We are developing a wellness Web site that will provide parents with information about healthy lifestyles," Johnson said.