

OBESITY IN BABIES

There has been a lot in the news lately about the link between this, that, or the other and childhood obesity. Recently, the focus seems to have turned toward infants in particular, with emphasis on the fact that obesity, the underlying cause of most of our country's healthcare expenses, has become more prevalent in babies as well as adults.

Just last week I heard two stories on the radio about this issue. One segment reported that roughly one third of nine month olds are overweight. The second one was about the link between obesity and getting inadequate amounts of sleep, which apparently can be traced all the way back to babies who specifically do not get enough sleep at night. I also recently read an on-line article about how the introduction of solid foods prior to six months is a risk factor for obesity. It seems as if there is no shortage of stories about obese babies.

Without a doubt, our country is in the midst of an obesity epidemic. News stories have shed light on the various risk factors for obesity, but I often worry that people will read these articles or listen to the radio and get the wrong impression. It certainly makes a lot of parents worry, especially when they hear stories about obesity being related to poor sleep habits, which is something that many parents feel powerless to control! Several times a week I have parents ask me what they can do to keep their baby from becoming obese. Nine times out of ten I tell them to keep doing what they are already doing for the time being, but they should be ready to make changes later.

When you actually read the scientific studies (not just the articles on the internet), you find that roughly one third of babies are overweight at nine months and one third are overweight at two years, but the same children are not necessarily in both groups. A lot of children who are "overweight" during infancy wind up trimming down as toddlers, just when another group of toddlers starts to get heavier.

In fact, many breastfed babies initially gain weight faster than the growth charts would predict – some are absolutely huge by three or four months of age – and somewhere around nine to twelve months of age they usually burn it off as they move around more and more. These are not the children who are at greatest risk for becoming obese later in childhood.

My daughter is the perfect example of that. She was petite at birth but absolutely enormous at three months. That was just from breast milk. She had slimmed back down to the lower half of the weight chart by 18 months, and she is now a ten year-old beanpole. I would never want to imply that one example automatically demonstrates what will happen in all cases, but I see this pattern all the time, especially in breastfed babies.

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Breastfeeding mothers have very little control over how much milk their babies are getting and absolutely no control over how many calories come with that milk; one person's milk may have 50% more calories than another person's milk, so it is very hard to regulate caloric intake with a breastfed baby. The good news is that babies are usually pretty good at regulating it on their own.

Of course, there are times when even a breastfed baby can be overfed. In hindsight, I think that one of the reasons my daughter was so big was because she was extremely colicky, and feeding her was the only thing that seemed to comfort her. It is easy to say that one should not do that, but in the heat of the moment parents will do anything to comfort their children. The bottom line is that "overweight" breastfed babies are not the ones who are likely to become obese as they get older. In fact, study after study has shown that breast milk protects against obesity. Even "overfed" breastfed babies are protected.

So which babies are at greatest risk of becoming obese? There was also a story on the radio not too long ago about the relationship between childhood obesity and lower socioeconomic status. There are many reasons for this (I could write a whole book on the subject), but the fact of the matter is that the least expensive foods are often not very good for you. There are also some ethnic groups that are genetically predisposed to obesity when food is more abundant, and they just have to work extra hard at prevention. Beyond that, obesity is mostly related to bad habits that often start during childhood.

So what can a parent do to prevent childhood obesity? First and foremost, encourage your kids to be more physically active and limit "screen time". Whether it is a computer or a TV, time in front of a screen is inactive time. Second, avoid sugar-containing drinks, such as juices, sodas, sports drinks, and tea. There are a lot of calories in these drinks, which you do not need in order to satisfy your thirst. Next, limit fast food. I am not going to try to eliminate it all together, but once a week or less is best. Finally, encourage your kids to eat a good breakfast with protein, not just sugar. Skipping meals actually slows your metabolism and makes you hungrier later. That means getting up in time to actually do it, and going to bed early enough to feel good getting up that early.

Preventing obesity means establishing good habits at an early age. Being obese is usually a result of choices made along the way, and for children that means choices that have been made for them. It is much easier to establish a lifestyle for them at a young age than to try to change it when they get older.