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News

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*****Slide show urges parents to watch baby's weight.

DALLAS--A plump baby is a healthy baby?

Wrong, says Dr. Peggy Fry, assistant professor in Pediatrics and Nutrition and Dietetics at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas. A baby's health, especially as he or she grows older, is actually endangered when the baby is allowed to become overweight.

To warn parents against infant obesity and its future effects, Fry collaborated with members of UTHSCD's Children and Youth Project and the Biomedical Communications Department to produce a 13-minute slide show titled, "Controlling Your Child's Weight."

The slide show is part of a supplemental food and information program and has been accepted for state-wide use by the Texas Department of Health's Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program. The Children and Youth Project is a WIC project site and the film is available by request through the Austin office of the Department of Health to all WIC affiliates.

Fry explained that infant obesity is a fairly common problem, especially for families who eat many starchy and fat foods. She explained that infant obesity is defined as weight gain that is faster than a child's growth in length. Weight and length are compared to national growth figures to determine an overweight condition.

To illustrate this, Fry compared the national figures to the figures of an overweight male patient. At birth, the child weighed approximately seven pounds and was approximately 19 and one-half inches in length. At 12 months, this same infant weighed 23 pounds and had a length of 29 and one-half inches. The growth chart shows that the child was within the normal range during his first year.

After 12 months, the child's weight began going up more dramatically in comparison with its length growth. At 18 months, his weight was three and one-half pounds over the normal weight for his length.

At two years of age, this same infant was six and one-half pounds over normal while his length growth was within an inch of the normal curve.

Fry says one of the goals of the slide show is to urge parents to act immediately if they have been told that their baby is too heavy for its length. Failure to do so, as the curves illustrate, can result in continued obesity and future psychological and physical problems.

Good nutrition and exercise are important factors in correcting infant obesity and parents are urged to feed their young children less starch and fat and more protein and fresh vegetables.

(over)

Parents should also set good eating examples for their children and be consistent. Their decisions can determine whether a cute, plump baby grows into an overweight adult.

Fry explained that the most common psychological problem for overweight children is the development of a bad self image. As the child grows older and heavier, unhappiness and greater eating often result. Some future physical problems are breathing difficulties, high blood pressure, hardening of the arteries, diabetes and gall bladder disease.

The slide show also calls attention to some common misconceptions parents may have that can contribute to infant obesity.

Forced feeding, the classic "eat everything on your plate" command, only encourages eating beyond satisfaction. Once this kind of eating pattern is established, it is difficult to reverse. The film also dismisses as untrue the assumption that the more the child eats the better he or she will sleep.

Other actions like rewarding with food or automatically feeding a baby everytime it cries are also discouraged in the film. Alternatives like playing with the child are encouraged.

"Infant obesity can be corrected and controlled," Fry said. "If attention is given early to the problem, parents can help their children avoid future overweight problems."

Jeff Hollway, instructor in Biomedical Communications, was production consultant for the show. Becky Bell and Helen Chaplin, graduates of the Nutrition and Dietetics program at the School of Allied Health Sciences, assisted Fry in content consultation. Terry Cockerham, photojournalist in Medical Illustration, photographed the film strip. Donna Odel, medical graphics technician, produced the illustrations.

The English version was narrated by Jessie Riley, nurse assistant in Pediatrics. The Spanish version was narrated by Rosa Uretta, a member of the Children and Young Project staff.

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