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**Obesity 'a threat' to U.S. security  
Surgeon general urges cultural shift**

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**Kim Severson**

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An overweight America is killing itself with excess, and all that can save it is a major cultural transformation led by individuals and families, the U.S. surgeon general said Monday.

Speaking to more than 1,000 educators, doctors and public health officials in San Diego at the largest-ever conference on childhood obesity, Dr. Richard Carmona called obesity the fastest growing cause of illness and death in the United States and said it deserved more attention than any other epidemic.

"We need to lead a cultural transformation, and we can't let it be dwarfed by the other headlines of the day," he told the gathering.

The health implications in a country where two out of three adults are obese or overweight and the number of overweight kids has jumped by 50 percent in the decade are severe enough to threaten national security, he said.

"Our preparedness as a nation depends on our health as individuals," he said, noting that he had spent some of his first months in office working with military leaders concerned about obesity and lack of fitness among America's youth. "The military needs healthy recruits," he said.

He was, in many ways, preaching to the choir. The experts gathered for the conference, sponsored by the California Department of Health Services and UC Berkeley's Center for Weight and Health, face the fallout of a fat nation on a daily basis. They have seen severe jumps in the frequency of stroke, heart disease and diabetes among adults and children.

HEALTHY CHOICES

The San Diego gathering is an attempt to find solutions to a complex set of problems caused by Americans' spending more time in front of computers and televisions rather than in physical activity and consuming more sugary drinks, highly processed food and fast-food meals.

"The American people will make healthy choices if given the chance," Carmona said, citing efforts to curb smoking and reduce heart disease as examples.

But the surgeon general stopped short of recommending regulation of the fast-food industry and food manufacturers or of taking them to court, as a New York City lawyer did in July. A lawsuit filed in the New York State Supreme Court against the four big fast-food corporations claims the chains were negligent in selling food high in fat, salt, sugar and cholesterol content despite studies showing links between fast foods and obesity, diabetes, coronary heart disease, high blood pressure and other health problems.

"Do we want to get into a fight with the food corporations of America?" he asked. Instead, he and U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson are taking a gentler approach. Over the past few months, they have met with leaders of major fast-food and food manufacturing companies to persuade them to deliver healthy messages about food and provide healthier menu options.

"They're getting beat up, and they are trying to do the right thing," he said.

He maintained that the best way to make the nation slimmer was to encourage individuals and families get more exercise and eat healthier food. And community leaders on every level -- including the president -- should set an example. Carmona said that every time he sees President Bush, the chief executive asks him if he's had his workout that day. And Bush asks the same question of almost all the White House staff members he sees.

"From the very top, the boss wants that culture to permeate the United States," Carmona said.

Although conference attendees gave Carmona a standing ovation at the end of his hourlong speech, not everyone bought the message.

## POLICY CHANGES

"We think there are policy changes that need to be made so people can make those healthy choices," said Kenneth Hecht, head of California Food Policy Advocates in San Francisco. "The environment has to change so people have access to healthy food. It means more than simply showing your kids the right way to eat and how to ride a bike."

Government nutrition programs need major reform, Hecht said. Changes could focus on improving the quality of U.S. Department of Agriculture commodities used in school lunch programs as well as more money for such programs as neighborhood recreational facilities and establishing grocery stores in the inner city. Restoring school physical education programs, improving nutrition programs for low-income families and offering better education about food and exercise are also needed, he said.

"I like the surgeon general. He's a great guy," said Joanne Ikeda, a leading nutritional scientist and co-director of UC Berkeley's Center for Weight and Health. "But I'm a little concerned about his emphasis on the individual family making changes without society doing something to help families make these changes."

E-mail Kim Severson at [kseverson@sfgate.com](mailto:kseverson@sfgate.com).