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Fat Children Take Over the World

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Fat children are taking over the world. On every continent childish waistlines are expanding, driven by low-energy lifestyles and high-energy foods. Global fattening poses an equal threat to global warming, according to obesity specialists.

New estimates suggest that the proportion of school-age children in Europe who are obese has risen almost 50 per cent since the late 1990s and will nearly double to 6.4 million by 2010.

The number who are overweight is expected to grow by 1.3 million a year to a total of 26 million across the EU in four years time, more than one in three of the child population, the International Association for the Study of Obesity (IASO) says. The findings are published in the first edition of the International Journal of Pediatric Obesity, launched by the association today.

Similar increases in child obesity have been seen in north and south America, West Asia and the Pacific Region, the association says. As prosperity grows, so do bottoms.

Reports last week suggested the West's passion for fast food may be on the turn with restaurant closures announced by McDonalds in the UK and a collapse in profits at Britvic, the soft drinks manufacturer. Sales of healthy alternatives and of fruit and vegetables are sharply up.

But the change will come too late for many. The accretion of adipose tissue on developing bodies is already having a damaging effect on their health.

Over one million children in Europe are estimated to have high blood pressure or high cholesterol levels, putting them at risk of heart disease, and 1.4 million may have early stages of liver disorder, the association says.

Over-eating has resulted in 20,000 children suffering from so called "adult onset" or Type 2 diabetes, not previously seen in children, while over 400,000 have impaired glucose tolerance, a pre-diabetic stage which puts them at sharply increased risk of the condition.

Professor Philip James, chairman of the International Obesity Task Force, the research and advocacy arm of the IASO, said the problem was not confined to Europe.

"We may well be markedly underestimating the morbidity relating to this problem," he said. In America, home of the super-size meal, almost half of children will be overweight in both north and south of the continent in four years time, on present trends. The problem of obesity in schools is described by the US Surgeon General as "every bit as threatening to us as is the terrorist threat we face today." A sign of the change can be seen in the transformation in American football players. In 1960, a 250 lb player was considered a giant. This year more than 550 players weighing over 300 lbs (21 stone) were on National Football League training camp rosters. The average US soldier is 22 lbs heavier than his World War II counterpart.