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Report Urges Nationwide Campaign to Combat Childhood Obesity

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WASHINGTON – To fight the epidemic of childhood obesity, the nation must launch a far-reaching campaign enlisting virtually every aspect of society to reduce the amount of junk food that children eat and get them exercising more, the National Academy of Sciences said yesterday.

In the most comprehensive assessment to date of what the country should do counter the explosion in obesity among American youngsters, the academy called for an unprecedented national campaign that would involve parents, schools, food companies, and state, local and federal governments.

"We call for action to be taken immediately, given the alarming rate at which childhood obesity is increasing in America," said Jeffrey Koplan of Emory University, a former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, who chaired the 19-member committee convened by the academy's Institute of Medicine. "This report is calling for fundamental changes in our society."

The panel issued more than a dozen recommendations, including:

- Establish a high-level task force to coordinate all federal childhood anti-obesity activities.
- Develop new nutrition standards for all foods and beverages sold in schools.
- Make sure children get at least 30 minutes a day of moderate to vigorous physical activity.

- Convene a national conference to draft new guidelines aimed at curbing advertising and marketing of junk food to children and pass a law empowering the Federal Trade Commission to police the guidelines.

- Update food labels to give consumer more useful information.

The report also said that:

- The food industry should give consumers more and better nutritional information on packaged foods and in restaurants, as well as more healthful food and drink choices.

- Doctors should routinely measure every child's body mass index.

- State and local governments should take steps make it easier for everyone, including children, to exercise.

- Parents should make sure their children eat better, exercise more, and spend less time watching television and playing video games.

"Parents and families acting alone cannot reverse the climbing rates of obesity. Changes are needed in our schools and in communities, as well as the national level," Koplan said.

The rate of childhood obesity has skyrocketed in recent years, and more than 9 million children older than 6 are now considered overweight. The rapid rise has alarmed public health experts, because overweight children are far more likely to develop health problems.

Although the committee has no power to implement any of the recommendations, such reports frequently have a powerful influence on important public policy debates.

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) immediately introduced a bill that would carry out the report's recommendations and go further in many areas. It would, for example, ban vending machines selling unhealthful food or drink in schools receiving federal funds.

"It is Congress's responsibility to act," Kennedy said. "The future of millions of children depends on our answer."

But at least one of the recommendations immediately met resistance. While praising the report overall, a Department of Health and Human Services official said the recommendation to convene a task force to develop advertising and marketing guidelines is outside the agency's authority.

"We don't control advertising," said Christina Beato, acting assistant secretary for health. "To say we are going to develop guidelines for something we have no control over, how wise is that?"

Beato added that the department has begun work on a number of the other recommendations, including urging the food industry to take voluntary action and ordering the FDA to update food labels.

The recommendations were generally praised by both anti-obesity advocates and industry representatives.

"The report is thoughtful and reasoned," said Kelly Brownell of Yale University's Center for Eating and Weight Disorders. "But we've got an emergency on our hands, and I believe the science is robust enough to suggest taking more bold action."

The committee should, for example, have recommended moving the power to set federal nutritional policy from the Agriculture Department, which is too cozy with the food industry, to the CDC, he said.

Marion Nestle, a nutrition expert at New York University, agreed. She praised the report overall but criticized the committee for not calling for more mandatory action.

"The government recommendations are weak because they do not include clear goals with timelines for achieving them or any system of accountability," Nestle said. "The food industry recommendations are weak because they are voluntary, and we already know that voluntary doesn't work."

Industry representatives praised the report's comprehensive approach but said mandatory requirements are unnecessary, especially because many food companies are already taking voluntary action.

Robert Earl of the National Food Processors Association expressed concern about establishing nutritional guidelines for all foods sold in schools.

"That likely will create more of a 'good food, bad food' environment and create a host of mixed messages," Earl said. "That could eliminate some very wholesome and nutritious options that are part of good, nutritious diet," such as tortilla chips.

Daniel L. Jaffe of the Association of National Advertisers said that advertisers are already sensitive to the issue and that the FTC has all the power it needs.

"We have been taking the issue of obesity and food advertising extremely seriously for quite some time," Jaffe said.