

Kids diagnosed with Type II diabetes more frequently at younger ages

Long gone are the microwave dinners and fried foods that Ronnie used to eat. Now, her family sits down to healthier meals such as baked chicken, shrimp and veggies or chef salads. Ronnie, 14, always makes sure she tests her blood sugar first, something she's been doing since she was diagnosed with Type II diabetes.

"I just immediately started crying," said Ronnie, who recalled learning of the diagnosis at age 9. "I was freaked out about it."

Ronnie is one of a growing number of young people diagnosed with the condition once known as adult-onset diabetes, because it typically developed among overweight adults. These days, doctors are diagnosing the condition more frequently and at younger ages than ever before.

In fact, Robert Murray, MD, director of the Center for Healthy Weight and Nutrition at Nationwide Children's Hospital, says children as young as 5 years old are being diagnosed with high insulin levels, pre-diabetes and even Type II diabetes.

"With the obesity epidemic fueling diabetes, it is estimated that one of every three kids born in the year 2000 will become diabetic during their lifetime, if we do nothing to intervene," Murray said.

Statistics show that two-thirds of adults are overweight and one-third is obese. Children and adolescents are following in their parents' footsteps as obesity rates rise rapidly among children. In Ohio, a study by the Ohio Department of Health found that one out of every three third-graders is overweight, and one in five is obese. In inner-city areas and in the southern Appalachian Ohio counties, nearly half of kids are overweight.

"This trend shows no sign of slowing, meaning that the pool of diabetes, and eventually heart disease, will steadily rise," Dr. Murray said. "If we, as adult decision-makers, do nothing about it, we threaten the future health of our children for life."

According to Dana Hardin, MD, director of endocrinology at Nationwide Children's Hospital, Type II diabetes develops when an individual becomes resistant to the action of insulin in the body. Insulin is necessary, because it responds to rising blood sugar after meals to lower the glucose in the blood and drive it into all the cells of the body for use as energy. Type II diabetes and obesity often can lead to inflammation, high blood pressure, sleep apnea, asthma, liver damage, renal disease, heart disease and even cancer.

"Kids diagnosed at age 10 stand to lose up to 10 to 23 years of their lives if their diabetes is not treated or if their blood sugar control is poor despite treatment,"



Photo courtesy of Nationwide Children's Hospital

After being diagnosed with diabetes at age 9, Ronnie made changes to her diet, opting for salads and lean meats instead of fried foods and heavy starches.

Dr. Hardin said. "It's a family responsibility to prevent it and a physician's responsibility to teach families how to prevent the disease, to screen for the disease in children who are at risk and to prescribe appropriate treatment once the disease is diagnosed."

In order to counteract this trend, Dr. Murray encourages parents to learn their child's BMI and track it at every well-child visit. Also, parents should alert physicians to any family history of overweight, heart disease or diabetes. If one or both parents are overweight, Murray recommends they seek out help from their family doctor, a registered dietitian or a recreation therapist.

Parents also should encourage healthy lifestyle choices and lead by example. Limit TV viewing to less than two hours each day and make sure kids get outside for play every day.

Food choices also need to be re-evaluated. Cut down on sugared drinks, fast food and sweets. Limit portion sizes and emphasize fruits, veggies, whole grains, low-fat dairy and lean cuts of meats.

With the help of her family, Ronnie is eating healthier, exercising more and paying attention to carbohydrates, sugar and fat content.

That diligence has paid off. Ronnie lost 45 pounds, and today, she's keeping the disease under control and enjoying a new, healthy lifestyle.