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ADA Contact: Diane Tuncer
(703) 299-5510

NAASO Contact: Edward Bernstein
(301) 563-6526

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Youth Weight-Loss: What Schools Can Do to Help Stem the Tide of Childhood Obesity

—After-School Programs, Smaller Snack Portions and Better Health Education Can Make a Difference—

(Las Vegas, NV) – November 15 – School-based programs can play a significant role in helping youth to lose weight or at least avoid putting it on, according to several studies being presented at the North American Association for the Study of Obesity’s (NAASO’s) Annual Scientific Meeting.

“We are facing an epidemic of overweight and obesity across all age groups but our children are of paramount concern. The number of overweight and obese children has doubled in the last 20 years and we are facing an explosion of “adult onset” diabetes in children’s clinics. Therefore, the helpful information we are learning from these studies, and others presented this week take on a profound significance,” said Barbara Corkey, PhD, President, NAASO.

“Children and adolescents spend more time in school or involved in school-based activities than anything else. Our schools have to be a major component of our efforts to prevent overweight and obesity. These studies show that schools can play a key role in preventing obesity by providing instruction on proper nutrition and physical activity, and through physical activity that takes place as part of the curriculum, recess, and extracurricular activities,” said Tom Wadden, PhD, Vice-President, NAASO.

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Youth Weight Loss – page 2

Programs such as Medical College of Georgia’s FitKid Project offer a good example of how school-based fitness programs can make a difference. This program provided third-graders in Augusta-Richmond County with 80 minutes of physical activity and 40 minutes of academic enrichment every day after school for the duration of the school year. The physical activity portion focused on motor-skill acquisition through sports such as basketball, volleyball and soccer and also included dance. Most important, it also included 40 minutes of vigorous exercise designed to maintain heart rates above 150 beats per minute. The academic portion provided homework help and a general academic curriculum.

At the end of the school year, those children who took part in at least 40 percent of the classes (those who came at least twice a week) saw a 0.7 percent decrease in their percentage of body fat, compared to children at schools that did not participate in the program, who saw an increase of 0.1 percent in body fat. Those who took part in at least 80 percent of the classes (who came at least four times per week) saw a 1.1 percent drop in body fat.

Children who participated in the FitKid program also saw a greater increase in bone density, a smaller increase in waist circumference, and improvements in cardiovascular fitness. The results being presented at the NAASO conference reflect the first year of what will be a three-year study at its conclusion.

Another study calculated the potential calorie-saving effect of shrinking middle school snack-bar portion sizes to ‘pre-supersize’ levels. Using actual sales data from 23 Texas middle school snack bars, the study determined that students would have consumed an average of 45 fewer calories per day if snack bars sold 1-ounce bags of chips instead of 3.75-ounce bags, and 12-ounce cans of sweetened beverages rather than 20-ounce bottles. Over the school year, this could prevent up to two pounds of excess weight gain per child.

“Reducing snack-food portion sizes is an easy but significant step toward making the school eating environment healthier for children,” said lead researcher Dr. Karen Cullen, Associate Professor of Behavioral Nutrition in the Children’s Nutrition Research Center at Baylor College of Medicine.

“Laboratory studies confirm that portion sizes can strongly influence how much children and young adults eat at meals. In addition, the portion size of many commercially available foods has increased dramatically in recent decades. These findings underscore the importance of looking at the portion sizes of meals served in schools,” said Myles Faith PhD, Chairman of the NAASO Pediatric Obesity Interest Group.

“The environment can exert powerful influences on children’s food selections at meals, and the school environment is no exception. Just as school environments can be engineered to promote less healthy lifestyle choices, we can imagine how they might be engineered to promote more healthful choices,” added Dr. Faith

A third study looked at the effectiveness of a program designed to help first-year university students avoid sudden weight gain, a trend often referred to as the “Freshmen 15.” The study, by researchers in Quebec, found that enrolling first-year students in a group seminar that focused on improving and maintaining healthy lifestyles helped them to lose an average of nearly half a pound over the course of a year, compared to students who did not take the seminar, who gained close to 4 pounds each on average.

The seminars, based in social cognitive theory, taught students about obesity and its consequences, good food habits, food caloric density concepts, and the benefits of physical activity. It also included information about local physical fitness centers and tips on how to maintain weight control during stressful times, such as exam periods.

“Young adulthood, particularly the early college years, is a time when it’s very easy to put on extra pounds,” said lead researcher Dr. Marie-France Langlois, Associate Professor of Medicine, Biochemistry and Physiology at the University of Sherbrooke in Quebec. “Our study showed that students gain weight very rapidly in their first few months of university studies. The small group seminar approach could be very effective at helping young people avoid unnecessary weight gain and at giving them the skills they need to avoid obesity later in life, as well.”

All of the studies were presented as part of a joint effort by NAASO and the American Diabetes Association (ADA) to increase awareness of the rising problem of obesity and its related health problems in the United States. NAASO and ADA recognize obesity as a significant threat to public health and are cooperating to provide further opportunities for sharing obesity information, increasing obesity awareness and facilitating more research and better clinical care in their joint effort to fight this disease.

The North American Association for the Study of Obesity (NAASO) is a leading scientific society dedicated to the study of obesity. NAASO is committed to encouraging research on the causes, treatment and prevention of obesity as well as to keeping the scientific community and public informed of new advances in the field. For more information about NAASO and obesity, visit www.naaso.org or call (301) 563-6526.

The American Diabetes Association is the nation's leading voluntary health organization supporting diabetes research, information, and advocacy. Founded in 1940, the Association has offices in every region of the country, providing services to hundreds of communities. For more information about the Association and diabetes, please visit www.diabetes.org or call 1-800-DIABETES (1-800-342-2383).

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