

## Diabetes in Children – A Growing Threat

Over the last several decades, childhood obesity in the United States has skyrocketed. With it, the diagnosis of type II diabetes in adolescents has become increasingly common. As health care providers continue to diagnose more and more children with type II diabetes and other weight-related diseases, feeding our kids becomes a matter of even greater importance.

**So what is diabetes?** In the body, a hormone called insulin is produced to shuttle glucose (sugar) from the blood stream into the cells to be used as energy. Glucose comes from the foods we eat, mainly carbohydrates, and is the major source of energy for the body. Type I diabetes results when the body is unable to produce insulin. In type II diabetics, the body produces the insulin but the cells don't respond to it, which leads to an increased amount of glucose in the blood. Although the direct cause of type II diabetes is unknown, many factors are thought to increase the risk. Among them are: a family history of the disease, overweight or obesity and physical inactivity. There are also certain ethnic populations, African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans, who are at an increased risk for type II diabetes. While there is no known cure, this type of diabetes can often be managed through a combination of diet and exercise. However, in many cases it may take oral medication or even insulin injections to bring it under control.

When a child has diabetes, meals, snacks, and beverages need to fit into a special meal plan as recommended by their physician or Registered Dietitian. A diet too high in carbohydrates, especially refined carbohydrates, may lead to elevated blood sugars. Skipping or going too long between meals may result in low blood sugar levels which can cause many symptoms from irritability to fainting. Optimal diabetic meal planning contains well-balanced meals that contain the right mix of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean protein along with limiting certain foods in the diet. The School Lunch Program offers these healthy food choices including snacks that are low in calories, fats and sugar. In the last few years we have eliminated many of the refined carbohydrates from our school menus including most chips, cookies and pastries while candy and sodas are never served in the cafeterias. By providing healthy foods and making nutrition information such as carbohydrate content available we can help all students, with or without diabetes, to develop a meal plan that allows them to enjoy the school lunch experience, be healthy and maintain or achieve a healthy weight.

The primary goal of school food service is to provide healthy meal and beverage options as well as to expose children to new food choices. As a parent or grandparent you too can encourage your children to be open to trying new foods. It will take an entire community to reverse the trends we are now seeing with obesity and diabetes. It is our hope that foods and beverages available in schools will contribute to teaching children lifelong eating habits. By giving our children the tools and the knowledge to lead a healthier lifestyle, perhaps we can have a positive impact on this growing epidemic.

If you have questions or need assistance, please contact your school food service manager. For more information regarding children and diabetes, visit The American Diabetes Association website at [www.diabetes.org](http://www.diabetes.org).