

Obesity Epidemic Requires Federal Intervention: “Healthy Kids” Key to Nation’s Healthy Future

U.S. Congressman James P. Moran (D-Va.)

Abstract

The Healthy Kids Act (H.R. 4053) legislation does three things: (1) establishes an office of Childhood Overweight and Obesity Prevention and Treatment within the Department of Health and Human Services to provide information and promote action on healthy eating, (2) institutes a three-tier system for labeling foods, and (3) enables regulatory action to curb food commercials targeting children.

J Diabetes Sci Technol 2009;4(1):226-227

Years of research have shown that a direct link exists between childhood obesity and the onset of type 2 diabetes in adulthood. This troubling link means that choices made during a child’s formative years can have far-reaching consequences later in life.

Decades of poor eating and not enough exercise reduce the ability of the body to produce or accept insulin. The result is often adult-onset diabetes, which can lead to even worse health problems, such as blindness, heart disease, and neuropathy. Combating the primary cause of type 2 diabetes at its source during early childhood is critical to the health and economic well-being of our nation.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, almost a third of our children are overweight, 1 in 6 is obese, and more than 1 in 10 is extremely obese. Over the past 30 years, the rates of childhood obesity have doubled for children aged 2 to 11 and have tripled for those aged 12 to 19.

Socioeconomics also factor in. Significant discrepancies show up between low-income and high-income households. A study of children in Colorado, the state with the lowest obesity rate in the country, found that 25% of children living in a low-income household were considered obese as compared to only 8% of children living in a household earning \$75,000 or more per year.

One of the most devastating health aspects of diabetes is that its complications can affect the entire body. Nerve damage, known as neuropathy, is the primary cause of these complications. Neuropathy occurs when, over time, excess glucose in the blood damages the walls of blood vessels that service the nerves. This can lead to a reduction in blood flow and numbness to the extremities—sometimes resulting in amputation. Diabetes can also affect passageways to the heart, and can lead to coronary artery disease, hypertension, and even blindness. According to the National Institutes of Health, individuals with diabetes are twice as likely to have heart disease or a stroke compared to those without the disease.

Author Affiliation: U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C.

Abbreviation: (COOPT) Childhood Overweight and Obesity Prevention and Treatment

Keywords: advertising, healthy, kids, labeling, obesity, regulation

Corresponding Author: Congressman James P. Moran, Attn: Marcia Knutson, 2239 Rayburn Building, Washington, DC 20515; email address marcia.knutson@mail.house.gov

For children, one's weight is not entirely within their control. Factors in their environment, such as a family's socioeconomic status, parental influence, and television marketing, fall outside the child's ability to manage. If a child is conditioned to behave a certain way and eat certain foods, it can be exceedingly difficult to alter these habits later in life.

In response to this crisis, I have introduced legislation in Congress that would initiate a comprehensive federal effort to combat childhood obesity. The Healthy Kids Act (H.R. 4053) would have three main functions. First, it would establish an office of Childhood Overweight and Obesity Prevention and Treatment (COOPT) within the Department of Health and Human Services. COOPT would promote and support school wellness policies, provide parents with information on health and nutrition, and implement age-appropriate physical activity programs. COOPT would also examine and address the unique needs of racial and ethnic minority groups and other high-risk populations.

Second, the Healthy Kids Act would require the director of COOPT to work in conjunction with the Secretary of Agriculture to update the current standards of foods and beverages available to school children outside of the federally supported school meal programs. Through this collaboration, foods would be categorized into one of three "tiers."

- Tier 1 foods and beverages are considered healthful for children and adolescents with their consumption encouraged accordingly.
- Tier 2 foods and beverages would not exceed levels of total, saturated, or trans fat; sugars; or sodium that are acceptable for a healthy diet in children and adolescents.
- Tier 3 foods and beverages do not contribute to a healthful diet for children and adolescents, and their consumption is therefore discouraged.

This legislation would enable the Director of COOPT, in consultation with the chairman of the Federal Trade Commission, to regulate the marketing, advertising, and promotion of foods and beverages to children on the basis of these three food tiers. Applicable to broadcast, cable, and satellite television providers, these regulations would restrict advertisements of tier 3 foodstuffs during children's television programming. It would also limit tier 2 food advertising during children's programs to

3 minutes per hour on weekdays and 2 minutes per hour on weekends.

Our kids are exposed to a shocking amount of advertisements touting nutritionally devoid foods on television. The average American child is exposed to 5500 food commercials a year. According to research by the American Psychological Association, children under 8 years of age lack the cognitive development to understand the intent of these advertisements and are therefore more prone to internalize these messages as truthful and accurate. Preference for a product develops after as little as a single exposure and strengthens with repeated viewing.

Some argue that the limitation of advertising of foodstuff to children constitutes a violation of the First Amendment. I disagree. Anyone who has raised children can attest that young minds (especially those in the first decade of life) have yet to achieve the level of cognitive development and reasoning skill that the First Amendment presupposes. Furthermore, the present epidemic, including the direct link between childhood obesity and chronic, costly health complications such as type 2 diabetes, justifies such measures to protect the greater good.

In an era of 24-hour advertising and single-parent households, relying on good parenting is not sufficient. A concerted nationwide effort is required to address the obesity epidemic. The Healthy Kids Act would lay that groundwork before our next generation is put at risk by equipping parents and kids with the information they need to make healthy food choices and placing reasonable limits on food advertising targeting children.