

## Guest columnist: Preventing heart disease must start in childhood

Written by

**Dr. Leah Swann**

We've heard it all before. Lose weight. Exercise. Eat healthy foods.

This is simple stuff, but with our complicated lives, how many of us listen? As a family physician, I am deeply troubled by the trends I see: Teenagers diagnosed with risk factors for cardiovascular disease, such as Type 2 diabetes, hypertension and high cholesterol. We are bombarded by the statistics: The prevalence of obesity in children has more than doubled in the past two decades, and in adolescents it has more than tripled to 18.1 percent.

A family's habits and simple medical interventions can prevent heart disease and may reverse the disheartening trends. Heart-healthy habits start with breastfeeding, ideally for at least a year, as recent studies have pointed toward a long-term protective effect for both the breastfeeding mother and her child.

Once weaning begins, parents need to serve a variety of healthy foods in appropriate portions. Help your child gain enthusiasm for fresh foods by shopping with them at a farmers market or growing a

vegetable garden. Involve your children in food preparation as much as possible.

The saying, "5-2-1-almost none," is a straightforward reminder of heart-healthy habits. On a daily basis, children should eat at least five servings of fruits and vegetables, limit screen (TV, computer, or video game) time to a maximum of two hours, get at least one hour of active play, and drink no sweetened beverages and almost no juice (4 ounces or less).

For many working parents, there just are not enough hours in the day to fit in a formal exercise program, so most of us need to find ways to be active while being with our children. A hike, a walk around the neighborhood, a game of tag, flying a kite or a bike ride can all be excellent ways to connect and keep everyone off the couch. Enjoyment of active free play is a vital legacy to leave our children.

If your doctor does not bring up the issue of weight, ask about it. Excess weight increases the heart's work and raises blood

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pressure and LDL (“bad”) cholesterol. Body mass index (BMI) is a number that relates weight to height and is an indicator of healthy or unhealthy weight. For children and teens, a BMI-for-age above the 85th percentile indicates being overweight, and above the 95th percentile, obesity.

For overweight adolescents and adults, even a modest amount of loss (about 5-10 pounds) can substantially reduce risk of cardiovascular disease.

Blood pressure should be checked starting at age 3.

Cholesterol screening is recommended for many children ages 2-10 with certain risk factors.

Usually, treatment for children involves diet and activity changes, but occasionally even cholesterol medication is needed in older children.

Children learn mainly by example, so we need to be good role models, set appropriate limits, and remember that prevention really is the best medicine.

Dr. Leah Swann is a board-certified family practitioner with Park Ridge Medical Associates and a member of the WNC/Buncombe County Medical Society. Her office is at 1998 Hendersonville Road, Asheville. Call her at 684-2008.

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