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“Mighty Mites”

deck: Type II Diabetes on the Rise Among Children

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Kathy Llamas is in control again. She gets regular exercise. Her blood sugar levels are down and she's in the habit of reading nutrition labels. She's keeping her diabetes at bay.

It's more than most 11-year-olds have to deal with, but Llamas is fighting an uphill battle. She is overweight, she is Hispanic and her grandmother suffered from diabetes.

Attending Kids N Fitness, a youth-centered program at Children's Hospital of Los Angeles (CHLA), helped Llamas learn the importance of eating right and getting exercise.

Overweight children tend to eat sugar-rich foods and get little exercise, straining their bodies' ability to effectively process insulin. Left unchecked, this can lead to type II diabetes – a condition that was virtually unheard of in children 20 years ago.

The percentage of overweight and obese children in the U.S. has increased by more than thirty percent over the past decade; today, one in five youths is overweight. While no national statistics are kept, regional studies reveal a frightening increase in type II diabetes among children – especially Hispanics, Native Americans and African Americans. Florida's Tallahassee Memorial Hospital's Diabetes Center is treating three times the cases it was three years ago. The American Diabetes Association now recommends diabetes screening for overweight children.

Dr. Francine Kaufman, head of endocrinology at CHLA, heads Kids N Fitness and says the alarming rise of kids with type II is connected to a general lack of nutrition in school cafeterias, poor physical-education standards and increased inactivity and obesity among children.

Like other programs across the country, Kids N Fitness works with patients who already have type II, as well as at-risk middle school kids. During the eight-week program, they exercise, learn good eating habits and blood sugar management.

Parents play an important part of the program's success. "We have to work with entire families, in order to address the burden of obesity," says Kaufman. "I think we can get back a generation of kids that we would have otherwise lost."

Sidebar 1: Thrifty Gene

Children of Native America, Hispanic, Asian and African American descent carry a gene known as the "thrifty gene" that causes a higher caloric retention than Caucasians. This gene is linked to agrarian peoples who suffered through centuries of feast and famine.

This gene developed as a way of storing calories during times of low caloric intake (famine). People of these ethnicities retain this gene even now, and they tend to gain weight without greater caloric intake than people who lack the gene.

Sidebar 2: For More Information:

The American Diabetes Association hosts a site just for kids. A red-haired 14-year old Wiz kid, Audry, guides kids through the site, describing how she juggles food, exercise and medication, and how they can do the same.

<http://www.diabetes.org/wizdom/>

Children with Diabetes offers nutrition basics, chat groups, recipes and information sources and message boards, as well as information on camps and clinics for kids with diabetes.

<http://www.childrenwithdiabetes.com>

The Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation provides advocacy information, diabetes news, clinical information and links to local JDF chapters across the country. JDF also hosts Kids Online site (<http://www.jdrf.org/kids/>), where kids can meet and share information and experiences.