



A Program of the National Institutes of Health

Overweight in African American Youth

Overview

Obesity—it's a devastating public-health crisis for the United States. Today, one-third of all adults are now classified as obese, a figure that has more than doubled over the last 30 years. And then there are the hard-to-believe effects of the epidemic on children: the most recent National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys (2007–2008) indicate that about **31.7 percent of children ages 2–19 years are overweight or obese, including 35.9 percent of all African American children of the same age.**¹ It is critical that we find better ways to help families maintain a healthy weight. Healthy eating, more physical activity, and less screen time are the cornerstones of **We Can!** (Ways to Enhance Children's Activity & Nutrition)[®], a program from the National Institutes of Health that helps children ages 8–13 and their families maintain a healthy weight. Launched in 2005, **We Can!** provides local communities and organizations with evidence-based curricula for youth, and materials, tips, and fun activities that empower parents and families to make behavioral choices that support a healthy lifestyle.

Snapshot of Overweight in America's Children

- Approximately 16.9 percent or about 1 in 6 children ages 2–19 years are obese. An additional 14.8 percent are considered overweight.¹
- In general, the prevalence of overweight is higher in African American and Hispanic children compared to non-Hispanic white children.¹ Approximately 35.9 percent of African American children ages 2–19 years are overweight or obese, compared to 29.3 percent of white children of the same age that fall in either category. By contrast, 38.2 percent of Hispanic children (including Mexican Americans) ages 2–19 years are overweight or obese.¹
- Being overweight can create dramatic health consequences for young people, such as increased risk for type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease, as well as myriad other problems such as stress, sadness, and low self-esteem.²

The We Can! Solution

The **We Can!** goal of creating healthier communities is being achieved through:

- **Community Outreach:** Today, over 1,300 communities in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and 12 other countries have committed to running **We Can!** programs. Sites are comprised of park and recreation departments, local and state health departments, hospitals and health care systems, school systems, universities, worksites, and many other settings. **We Can!** cities are committed to improving the health and well-being of their youth in places such as Atlanta, GA; Boston, MA; and Pittsburgh, PA.
 - Two of the **We Can!** cities in Georgia have made terrific inroads into the African American community. The City of Brunswick has partnered with the LINKS program to teach *Media-Smart Youth: Eat, Think and Be Active!*[®] to local Boys and Girls Club members, and the Brunswick staff has worked with their African American Health Information Resource Center's (AAHIRC) Ladies Living Smart program to educate women about issues like healthy eating—including hands-on field trips to the local farmers' market. The City of Savannah has been working with parents as well. Through its partnership with the West Broad

Street YMCA and the LINKS, Savannah is working to provide 20 women with free exercise classes and to educate them on healthy living (using materials from the **We Can!** Parent Program). Savannah has also held two “Home Run for Health” events that promote healthy lifestyle choices.

- **Materials:** **We Can!** enables an unlimited number of community sites to receive online access to materials, including the community toolkit; program posters; a parent handbook in both English and Spanish; tip sheets for parents; sample press releases; and other useful **We Can!** tools, tracking sheets, training, and other resources.
- **Partners:** **We Can!** has over 40 national and corporate partners that have joined the cause to prevent childhood overweight and improve the health of America's youth, including the Black Entertainment Television Foundation and the National Health Museum. These relationships strengthen the movement by helping to support **We Can!** at national conferences, implementing the curricula with employees, spreading the word about the program, recruiting community sites, and distributing **We Can!** materials.

We Can! encourages youth to:

- Choose a sufficient amount of a variety of fruits and vegetables every day.
- Decrease consumption of high-fat foods and energy-dense foods that are low in nutrient value.
- Enjoy small portions at home and at restaurants.
- Substitute water, fat-free milk, or lowfat milk for sweetened beverages.
- Engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity on most—preferably all—days of the week.
- Reduce sedentary activity by limiting screen time to no more than two hours per day.

To support young people in this program, **We Can!** provides the tools for parents and primary caregivers to:

- Increase the availability and accessibility of healthy foods in the home.
- Limit the availability and accessibility in the home of sweetened beverages.
- Emphasize a healthy eating plan that cuts back on high-fat foods and energy-dense (high-calorie) foods with low nutrient value.
- Support and enable family physical activity.
- Support and enable reduced screen time.

We Can! resources are available to community sites and partners across the country. Visit the **We Can!** Web site at: <http://wecan.nhlbi.nih.gov> to see what is happening in communities across the country, and to learn how you can get involved, or contact the NHLBI Health Information Center at (301) 592-8573 or nhlbiinfo@nhlbi.nih.gov.

Also, be sure to tap into the knowledge of other sites by registering for our Community of Practice (COP) portal at http://kn.nhlbi.nih.gov/communities/dynamiccommunitypublic.cfm?aic=953&sponsor_id=412. The **We Can!** COP provides a forum for community sites, partners, and other health professionals to exchange knowledge about leveraging community outreach, partnership development, and media activities to enhance **We Can!** programming. With interactive features like discussion groups and networking opportunities, the COP allows you to share your ideas and tips with other sites about tailoring **We Can!** programming to fit your community's needs.

Lastly, you can also interact with others interested in helping kids stay at a healthy weight by becoming a fan of the **We Can!** Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/nihwecan>).

We Can! was created by The National Institutes of Health's (NIH) National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), in collaboration with the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), and the National Cancer Institute (NCI).

¹ Ogden CL, Carroll MD, Curtin, LR, Lamb, MM, and Flegal, KM. (2010). Prevalence of High Body Mass Index in US Children and Adolescents, 2007-2008. *Journal of the American Medical Association*; 303(3): 242-249.

² NIH Publication No. 04-4955