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More younger children obese; trend affects Coachella Valley

Study: About 1 in 5 kids are overweight

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Nurse practitioner Rose Donnelly treated an 8-year-old boy Monday who is about 4 feet tall and weighs 130 pounds.

A child of his age and height should weigh 70 pounds, she said.

"We're seeing many children have this problem," said Donnelly of Cathedral City Family Medical Clinic.

The Coachella Valley joins the rest of the country in facing the problem of childhood obesity, which experts say is affecting children at younger ages compared to a few years ago.

A new study found more than half a million — nearly 1 in 5 — 4-year-olds around the country are obese.

The study is an analysis of nationally representative height and weight data on 8,550 preschoolers born in 2001. It was conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics.

Children were considered obese if their body-mass index, a height-weight ratio, was in the 95th percentile or higher based on government BMI growth charts. For 4-year-olds, that would be a BMI of about 18.

For example, a girl who is 41/2

The statistics are not shocking to Mark Hastings, who, along with his wife, Dorothy, owns and directs First School of the Desert.

"We've been seeing that trend for a number of years," he said.

The school, which has locations in La Quinta, Cathedral City and Palm Springs, tries to educate children and their parents about a healthy lifestyle.

Poor eating and recreational habits have played significant roles in obesity, Donnelly said.

"I think what I'm seeing is, children in school are being fed a diet that is very full of saturated fats and carbohydrates," she said. "I had one child who, all he does after school is go home and play video games all night long. They don't have the activities that children from 10 or 15 years ago were doing."

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, limiting the amount of time playing video games or

using a computer could decrease a child's weight by 5 pounds in six months, said Erica Ruiz, a La Quinta family physician.

"The first thing we tell parents when they come in and establish a problem is they need to cut down (daily) screen time to two hours," she said.

Experts say parents need to be more cognizant of their children's lifestyle habits.

Symptoms of obesity may include constipation and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder associated with a lack of sleep, Ruiz said.

Hastings' staff will talk with parents if they notice a child regularly bringing inappropriate food to the school.

"Proper diet takes a little bit of time ... time that's really precious and rare for new parents," Mark Hastings said.

Children that age will automatically choose food that tastes best, he said.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.
