The Growing Obesity Epidemic among Latino Youth
By Dr. Amelie G. Ramirez

Obesity causes more than 15 percent of this country’s preventable deaths—more than alcohol, toxins, care accidents, gun-related deaths, drug abuse and STDs combined—and it causes a huge financial strain on the health care system. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), obesity affects approximately 34 percent of adults and 17 percent of children in the United States. The agency recently estimated the costs of obesity at almost $150 billion per year, attributable to the impact of obesity on other chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer.

The obesity statistics for young Latinos are particularly frightening. Mexican-American children ages 2 to 19 are more likely to be obese or overweight (40.8 percent) than white (31.9 percent) and African-American (30 percent) children. Among preschoolers, nearly one out of every four Latinos is overweight. Studies show that Latino children’s diets are less healthy, their access to healthy foods is more limited, they are less active in organized sports and they watch more television.

But I don’t even need these statistics. All I have to do is visit my grandchild’s school, see Latino families shopping in stores or look outside at empty playgrounds. You and I can “see” the childhood obesity epidemic in predominantly Latino regions.

In Texas and across the nation, half of Latinos born today will develop diabetes. This disturbing statistic sometimes causes me to wonder if this be the first generation where parents outlive their children. We can’t afford to let that happen. That’s why efforts to reduce and prevent childhood obesity are so critically important, and that’s why Salud America!, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) Research Network to Prevent Obesity among Latino Children, created a national network of more than 1,800 researchers, community leaders, policymakers and other stakeholders. The network works to increase the number of researchers and advocates seeking environmental and policy solutions to address Latino childhood obesity.

In December 2011, Salud America! unveiled three major research briefs examining current evidence on Latino childhood obesity issues: the availability of healthy, affordable foods, opportunities for physical activity and the impact of food marketing on diets. These briefs can help policymakers make critical decisions in crafting policies and allocating resources to address the epidemic, and they are designed to have widespread applicability to Latino childhood obesity advocacy organizations.

Also in December, 20 Salud America! pilot research grantees unveiled individual research briefs full of outcomes and implications for policy on Latino childhood obesity. One grantee found that, in examining body image perceptions among Latinos along the Texas-Mexico border, 32 percent of children believed they were overweight, but only 15 percent of parents reported seeing their children as overweight. Another grantee project...
demonstrated that small, independently owned restaurants in low-income Latino communities can help improve local nutrition environments by using menu labeling. Another project found that school district compliance with physical education policies may be an important determinant of Latino children’s fitness status. These grantees are models of “what’s working” to prevent obesity. You can read all grantee briefs at http://www.salud-america.org/research.html.

I urge you to join Salud America! at http://www.salud-america.org/join.html. I also urge you to watch a dramatic Latino childhood obesity video (http://youtu.be/pnfZvXItI1c) and use it as a “discussion starter” at school board meetings or community meetings about childhood obesity. You can also contact your local, state and federal leaders to encourage actions to reduce Latino childhood obesity and support healthier communities.

New research on this critical health issue will be presented during an expert panel, *Mechanisms and Prevention of Obesity and Obesity-Related Diseases*, at the annual conference of The Academy of Medicine, Engineering & Science of Texas on January 13, 2012, in Houston. This panel is part of a conference session entitled *The Obesity Epidemic* that will include a keynote presentation by William H. Dietz, M.D., Ph.D., Director, Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In the end, it is important to remember just how complicated the issue of childhood obesity is for Latinos and to know that efforts to solve this issue must attack the epidemic on every front; from nutrition to physical activity to media and marketing. We each need to do our part to ensure that we’re not the first generation of parents to outlive our children.

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