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## Watsonville faces a growing number of overweight children

By JONDI GUMZ

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WATSONVILLE -- Too often, children in Watsonville are eating food that is not good for them, and it shows.

About 31 percent of Watsonville's children are obese by age 8, and another 23 percent are overweight, a study for the Pajaro Valley Community Health Trust found last year.

Nationally, 15 percent of children are obese and 30 percent are overweight, which makes the local numbers especially troubling. Doctors say being overweight puts children at risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and early puberty, and they are more likely to be obese as adults, increasing their chances for a stroke and cardiovascular disease.

Ironically, these young people are growing up in the Pajaro Valley, a region known worldwide for its strawberries, lettuce and artichokes. Yet fresh fruits and vegetables, which generate \$350 million a year for local growers, are too often a tiny part of local children's daily diet.

When the lunch bell rings at Watsonville High School, the school cafeteria serves nutritionally balanced meals. But only a quarter of students eat there. Most head downtown for a quick bite to eat.

On a typical afternoon, they swarm into El Primo Market two blocks from campus. Some girls choose a container of freshly cut fruit, but the most popular choice is a bag of salty chips and a soda, just 99 cents each.

The sale of soda is banned on campus. But it's available at 27 places within five minutes, according to health teacher Rob Cornett.

Farther from campus, fast-food chains line Freedom Boulevard.

It's a buffet of choices: McDonald's, Burger King, KFC, Carl's Jr., Taco Bell, Jack in the Box, Foster's Freeze. Eats are cheap: Two tacos for \$2, burritos for 89 cents, burgers for 99 cents.

"It's cheaper to eat unhealthy," said Selina Murillo, a grocery clerk in Watsonville.

A taste for sugar

Since 2003, when the U.S. surgeon general declared childhood obesity a crisis of epidemic proportions, researchers, educators and policymakers have been studying the problem intensely.

Doctors formed a nonprofit association to lobby for more research; federal funding has grown from \$100 million to more than \$400 million.

Watsonville teens themselves are concerned. About 20 students at Watsonville High School have joined a project initiated by United Way to increase their opportunities for healthy eating.

Being overweight generally results from taking in too many calories and doing too little physical activity.

Watsonville's weight problem is caused, in part, by national trends, including the skyrocketing consumption of soda and the increased amount of time watching TV or playing video games. In addition, for decades, a federal policy subsidized dairy and cereal products for low-income mothers and young children but not fresh fruits and vegetables.

Nationally, consumption of soda, fruit drinks and sports drinks -- all sweetened with sugar -- is up significantly compared to a decade ago, according to a study published in Pediatrics last year.

A standard soda used to be 12 ounces but now soda is frequently sold in 20-ounce bottles, a marketing technique called supersizing.

John Ferolito and Don Vultaggio, who started out as Brooklyn beer distributors, became multimillionaires in the mid-1990s with their sweetened tea creation, AriZona, which comes in a jumbo 23-ounce can -- big enough for three servings -- priced at 99 cents.

Once an occasional treat, soft drinks have become the most consumed food in America. It's one of the reasons American consume nearly half a pound of sugar a day.

Study after study has come to the same conclusion: Consumption of sweetened soft drinks is associated with weight gain.

For teens, soda is more popular than milk.

That's problematic because one 12-ounce soda equals 10 teaspoons of sugar, according to Dr. Jonathan Ramprasad and Dr. Jonathan Evans, Florida pediatricians. Children who drink milk tend to reduce their consumption of other calories but they tend to eat as many or more calories while drinking soft drinks, they said.

The average teen boy drinks two 12-ounce sodas per day.

He would have to jog for an hour or walk for more than three hours to burn off those calories.

Marketing drives sales

The fact that Watsonville's population is 75 percent Latino plays a role in its higher than average incidence of obesity.

Consumer research shows Latino teens are heavy soda drinkers, so advertising to Latinos is a way to drive future growth of sales and profits.

In the markets along Watsonville's Main Street, cases of soda greet shoppers entering the store and at the end of aisles.

For Latino shoppers on a budget, the price is right. An 8-pack is \$2.99, a 24-pack is \$6.99.

At convenience stores, milk is more expensive and gets less shelf space than Tampico and Sunny Delight, popular juice drinks that contain as much sugar per serving as soda.

Complicating the search for a solution is that Latina mothers often view young children who are overweight as healthy; a thin child is considered to be in poor health. Many believe young children will outgrow being overweight or that weight is determined by genetics.

"We're fighting a losing battle," said Dr. Michelle Simon, 62, a pediatrician in Watsonville who has participated in countless meetings on the topic of overweight children over the past eight years.

She's seen her patients at the market with their children, their shopping carts "stuffed with all the wrong food."

"These things are marketed to kids -- they fall for the advertising," she said. "How can we compete with McDonald's? It's impossible to counter without the community involved."