

HEALTH

Youth physical fitness declining, expert says

Special to Sentinel-Voice

HOUSTON — Chances are when children return to school this fall they will be among a growing population of physically unfit youths.

"Children and teenagers are increasingly obese and are not as physically active as their counterparts in previous decades," said Dr. Pat Vehrs, an adolescent health expert at Baylor College of Medicine and Texas Children's Hospital in Houston.

"National surveys show that since the 1960s, but especially in the last decade, there has been an increase in the percentage of body fat and a decrease in physical activity among youth," said Vehrs, who says 21 percent of children ages 6 to 17 are obese.

Vehrs cites such probable causes are:

- Parents who work asking their kids to stay home until they come home. This encourages inactivity by limiting them to indoor pursuits.
- Little or no family physical activities. Often parents are too tired when they come home to walk, shoot baskets or bike with their kids.
- Increased popularity of "entertainment-by-computer" or television versus old-fashioned playing outdoors.
- Fear of neighborhood crime.
- Lack of sidewalks, well-lit streets, access to parks, gyms or pools in suburban areas.



• Age requirements or rules requiring a guardian's presence at health clubs.

"It's not surprising that kids find it difficult to remain physically active," Vehrs said. "They are not getting enough encouragement from their parents and society."

Neither may they be getting much help at school, he said, where physical education courses are increasingly considered an elective.

"Even if they enroll in Physical Education (P.E.), classes are usually less than an hour. By the time they've changed clothes, gotten into the gym and taken roll, there is very little actual time

left for physical activity," he said.

Vehrs said that 70 percent of high school students are physically active for less than 20 minutes during P.E. Enrollment in P.E. declines as grade levels increase. Only 10 percent of 12th graders are enrolled in daily P.E., Vehrs said.

"This takes a toll far greater than just being in shape. Studies have shown that physical fitness can improve self-esteem, body image, academic performance and improve energy levels," said Vehrs said.

Parents are key to motivating children to become physically active.

"One of the best ways to get kids to exercise is to become involved yourself," he said. "Kids love to exercise with their parents. Whether it's walking, biking, swimming, tennis or just sharing time on the treadmill — if you are enthused, they will become enthused."

Other ways to build-up physical fitness are letting your kids ride their bikes to school or walk if it is safe, encouraging them to play at recess, keeping exercise equipment in the house — not the garage, looking for church or other agency-sponsored health camps or activities, and including P.E. course as a regular part of your child's curriculum.

"Above all, encourage them to do something they like. They will be more inclined to stick with it," Vehrs said.

Thousands unaware pneumonia vaccine could save them

Special to Sentinel-Voice

HOUSTON — Thousands of lives are being lost every year because people are unaware of a readily available pneumonia vaccine.

It is the vaccine for pneumococcal pneumonia, an illness that annually claims thousands of lives, mostly adults older than 65 but also very young children and people with certain chronic illnesses.

Too few people even know about the vaccine, said Dr. Daniel M. Musher, an infectious-disease expert at Houston's Baylor College of Medicine

and Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

"The sad fact is that many people whose lives could be saved by the pneumonia vaccine do not get inoculated because they are unaware of it and they are not pressured by their physicians to take it," Musher said.

"Research has shown that people are more likely to get inoculated against pneumonia if their doctors recommend it," he said, "and, though the numbers of those getting the vaccine are rising, there are still too many people who need it but are unaware of it."

The vaccine is also important, Musher said, for people with lung disease, heart disease and any kind of immune-system disorder, including HIV infection.

"People who have had their spleens removed are especially susceptible to pneumococcal infection and must be vaccinated," he said. The spleen helps clear bacteria from the blood, and its absence leaves a person prey to pneumonia infections. At one time it was widely believed that the beneficial effects of pneumonia vaccine persisted for a lifetime, but, Musher said, research at Houston's VAMC has shown that

vaccination probably should be repeated at five- to 10-year intervals.

For people without spleens, Musher recommends revaccination every five years. Young children are also especially susceptible to pneumonia, but the vaccine is not effective in people younger than 2, Musher said.

While pneumonia is not generally a major killer of otherwise-healthy people between toddler age and 65, Musher said, "I personally have had every member of my family vaccinated against pneumococcal infection. It can't hurt, and it may well save a life."

Study says teens influenced by parents

Special to Sentinel-Voice

CHICAGO — Parents have a lasting effect on their children's behavior, a study found.

"There is a perception that pretty much after early adolescence, parents surrender their influence over kids and kids become beholden to the peer group," said lead author Michael D. Resnick, a sociologist at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. "Everything in this study suggests the contrary."

The 1995 federally funded study is the most comprehensive survey ever done of American adolescents, involving more than 12,000 seventh-through 12th-graders.

The findings, published in Wednesday's issue of The Journal of the American Medical Association, indicate that the more teen-agers feel loved by their parents and comfortable in their schools, the less likely they are to have early sex, smoke, abuse alcohol or drugs, or commit violence or suicide.

If parents expected adolescents to get good grades and refrain from sex, those expectations influenced the adolescents' behavior powerfully through 12th grade, regardless of family income, race or single- or dual-parent status, researchers found.

"Adolescents are often very effective at convincing us that

what we say is irrelevant to their lives, and the mistake we make as adults is that we turn around and we believe it," Resnick said.

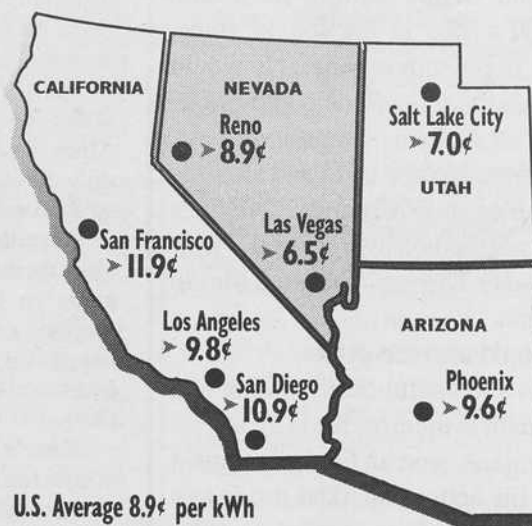
However, Resnick said the study found, the health and well-being of teen-agers "still rests in that strong feeling of being cared for by parents."

Far more important than

school size or type or the training of teachers is whether the school is an "arena of comfort," he said.

An expert not involved in the work, Dr. Jonathan D. Klein of the University of Rochester School of Medicine in New York, said the findings are consistent with previous research that has been done.

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