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EN 102-008

1 December 2011

Obesity in Alabama

Obesity is a term that means having too much body fat. It can be very damaging to a person’s health, causing a great variety of illnesses, and rates of obesity continue to increase year by year. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, the state of Alabama is one of the most obese states in America. Only competing with Mississippi and West Virginia, Alabama has an outrageous obesity rate of 32.2 percent (NCSL). Why is obesity so common in this state? Why does Alabama have such high numbers? What is the state doing so wrong? What can be done to fix this problem? Because of the many health hazards obesity poses, the latter is the question at hand. Several ways to lower these numbers have been suggested, but it is a difficult problem to approach. Some health specialists believe that the best way to resolve the problem would be to actually cure the obese population and have made this obvious by suggesting the extreme—bariatric surgery, or weight loss surgery. Another possible way to lower the rates of obesity in Alabama would be to monitor the output of unhealthy and fatty foods distributed by restaurants and other food distributing companies in the state, and perhaps require them to offer more healthy choices. Despite these two intriguing solution, the most feasible solution would be to prevent obesity rather than try and cure it by incorporating nutrition courses and increasing physical activity required in public school systems. This would be helpful in teaching children about proper nutrition and informing of them how extremely important it is. That being said, stronger physical education programs would keep children more active, which makes them less likely to become obese due to the fact that obesity is caused by the intake of too many calories paired with an insufficient amount of exercise. Although it is true that this could not and would not erase all obesity in Alabama, having a good knowledge of good eating habits and nutritional facts early on in the life of a child would certainly decrease these rising rates.

Obesity is often confused with the term overweight, which refers to a person that weighs too much, which can consist of muscle and bone. Obesity, however, is all body fat, which is why it is such a threatening problem. The cause of obesity is simple: the consumption of an excess amount of calories by an inactive person. Obesity is a term that usually refers to someone whose body mass index, which is a height to weight ratio, is much higher than it should be. Health issues caused by the excess amount of fat tend to classify a person as obese as well. That being said, obesity can be extremely damaging to a person’s health, causing many different types of illnesses, such as Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, as well as severe sleep apnea. According to the U.S. National Library of Medicine, “If you are obese, losing even 5 to 10 percent of your weight can delay or prevent some of these diseases” (Medline). This should be a wake up call to obese Alabamians. Also, people that struggle with obesity often cannot lead normal lives. Often, victims of obesity are bed-ridden and cannot even walk due to their weight. This is often a cause of disease as well. It is these life-threatening illnesses and struggles that bring the problem of obesity to the attention of so many people.

Health specialists have suggested bariatric surgery as a solution to the great number of obese Alabamians present today. Bariatric surgery refers to a surgical procedure that limits the amount of food a person can take in, or digest. The most common type of bariatric surgery now consists of a band being placed around the top of the stomach to decrease the size of the space between the stomach and throat, making the patient unable to eat as much, thus causing him or her to lose weight via less calorie consumption. Aside from the gastric band, gastric bypass is still extremely popular, using the same concept as the band procedure but decreases the size of the opening by actually stapling the stomach’s opening instead. This procedure would be greatly effective for those who struggle with obesity, however it has its downfalls. First of all, not everyone can be considered a candidate for such a procedure, and doctors will not operate on just anyone that requests the surgery, especially if help is being pursued as a preventative measure. Also, the resources needed to prepare for the procedure as well as to recover from it are limited to some people, putting this solution out of reach for many. The biggest problem with this solution is the monetary expense of it. The surgery can range from $17,000 to $35,000, and is often not covered by insurance (Ambinder 77). Also, the cost of proper nutrition and health care required after surgery adds even more money to the expense, making it even harder to afford. Marc Ambinder, a post-operative bariatric surgery patient himself as well as a journalist seemed to give his approval of the idea of bariatric surgery and even stated that the expenses may equal out one day, but did point out how absolutely radical the idea really is:

Surgery, for, say, 1 million of America’s most obese might cost no less than $30 billion, and probably much more. While the total cost of surgery for everyone who is obese—perhaps as many as four out of ten Americans by 2015—may well be less than the financial burden of the diseases associated with obesity, surgery still seems inordinately expensive, unwise, and unfeasible as a hypothetical mass solution. (77)

Overall, this solution to the problem of obesity in Alabama is impossible for some.

Another possible solution to lower the obesity rates in the state of Alabama would be to monitor the output and the distribution of fattening and unhealthy foods in restaurants and other food distributors in the state. The government could force restaurants to limit their unhealthy choices on menus and increase their number of healthy options for customers, making it easier for customers to have access to less fattening foods. However, this solution also has its problems as well. First of all, it is hard to reach a high government level to propose a law such as this one, especially since the government tends to see problems such as these as inferior. Also, restaurants and food distributors would suffer, decreasing revenue for the state of Alabama itself. It is because of this that this solution is unthinkable as well.

The difficulty of trying to find a solution to this problem is not knowing what angle to take on it. The past two suggested solutions took an approach to actually cure the already obese citizens of Alabama by actually cutting them open or taking food away from them. Instead, the problem should be prevented before it starts. Although it would not erase all obesity in Alabama, perhaps the most feasible solution to this problem would be to incorporate nutrition courses and increasing the amount of physical activity students participate in in public school systems in the state of Alabama. Research shows that obesity almost always starts as a child, so why not stop it there? Ann Cooper, who refers to herself as the “Renegade Lunch Lady,” states how intense the problem is in her article “Lunch Lessons”:

It’s predicted that one of every two black and Latino children born in 2000 in the United States—and one of every three white children—will contract diabetes in their lifetimes, most before they graduate high school. By 2018, this may mean that 30–35 percent of all school-age children are insulin dependent (Cooper 75).

If the Alabama school board and legislature do not find that to be an overwhelming problem then the state has more problems than just obesity.

Giving children a good knowledge base on obesity and how it can affect someone’s life and explaining proper nutrition to them would make children more aware of it from the start, and could possibly take preventative measures to avoid obesity in their later years. Teaching young students what exactly it is they are ingesting and what it does to their bodies over time would be more than helpful to their health in the long run. Like every other possible solution to a problem such as this one, this is an admittedly imperfect solution. Public school systems, especially those in the state of Alabama, are not known for having extra cash to incorporate unnecessary elective courses, so funding for these classes could be a large problem for some schools (Healy 11). Funding to pay for the faculty as well as the facilities and resources can be highly difficult for some schools to acquire. Also, another problem with this is than not all children attend public schools. Private schooled students as well as home-schooled students must be taken into account as well. Despite these minor flaws, incorporating educational nutrition courses in elementary schools and even secondary education establishments in the state of Alabama would certainly bring the rates of obesity down in the heavy state.

Alongside those nutrition classes should be strong physical education programs. One cause of obesity is lack of physical activity and exercise, and that is one factor of it that is completely avoidable. The more physical activity children engage in, the more of a habit it becomes and the less likely they are to become obese as children or as adults. A healthy amount of exercise is not only good for the children’s weight but is extremely important when it comes to the cardiac problems that arise with an unhealthy diet. Although most children are already very active, increasing their physical activity by thirty minutes or so each day can make a world of difference for those children who may unknowingly be starting an unhealthy, obese life.

The United States is the second most obese country in the world, trailing only Mexico. According to statistics released from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, over one-third of U.S. adults are considered obese (Ebbeling 1). That being said, the state of Alabama is usually classified as the second most obese state in the United States, varying only slightly over the years (Winne 46). Obviously, Alabama has a serious issue at hand. Although it may not seem like a problem worth solving or even discussing, obesity is harmful and very dangerous to those it affects. It causes a number of life-threatening diseases such as cardio-vascular disease, diabetes, asthma and even cancer. Researchers Raj and Krishna Kumar explain through a research study that “obesity is associated with an increased risk of morbidity and mortality as well as reduced life expectancy” (Raj 598). It is this statement that weighs heavily on the minds of health specialists trying to decrease obesity rates. Several solutions to this immense problem could be considered, such as bariatric surgery or monitoring the food distribution of companies and restaurants, but both of these would more than likely falter. Requiring all public elementary as well as secondary schools to incorporate nutritional education classes would surely decrease the obesity rates in the state of Alabama. Although this disastrous and dangerous problem will continue to be an epidemic in the United States as well as in most parts of the world, perhaps Alabama can lower its ratings enough to make a difference and maybe even save a few lives.

Word Count: 1926

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