

Childhood obesity: A growing problem in the U.S.

About 15 percent of children living in the United States between the ages of 10 and 18 can be classified as obese, said Dr. Robert Ancona, the head of pediatrics at St. Joseph Medical Center in Towson.

There are multiple reasons why a child becomes obese, but one of the major causes is eating too much high-density foods and not getting enough exercise. Many children are eating more fast food, foods that have “empty calories” or sugary soft drinks, said Dr. Ancona. He said these kinds of foods don’t satisfy a person’s hunger as much as foods that are high in fiber, like vegetables and whole grains.

According to Dr. Ancona, a person’s risk of becoming obese can depend on a variety of things including race, ethnicity and gender. He said studies have also found that a woman’s pre-pregnancy weight can affect the future weight of her unborn child.

The population of people who are obese is growing and as obese children grow up they will become obese adults; it is also likely that their children will become obese unless they work on living a healthier lifestyle.

Obesity can cause many health problems including type two diabetes, high blood pressure, hypercholesterolemia and joint problems. Doctors are now seeing more children with type two diabetes than they were even 10 years ago, said Dr. Ancona.

“Obesity may also increase your risk of having some cancers, like prostate cancer and colon cancer,” said Dr. Ancona. “The more obese you are, the shorter your lifespan.”

When it comes to encouraging children to eat healthier and become more active, parents need to be a positive reinforcement and role model, said the head of pediatrics. He said one major problem is that parents are not active and therefore their children don’t become active. Nutritional eating and a healthy lifestyle are learned habits, said Dr. Ancona.

“Don’t use food as a reward or punishment,” said Dr. Ancona. “Get everyone in the family involved in healthy eating. Parents have to make a commitment to good nutrition.”

Dr. Ancona recommends limiting TV, phone and video game time, and he recommends becoming active as a family. Not only do family activities encourage a healthy lifestyle, they build up the family unit as a whole.

“Whatever you do, you need to do it gradually. Don’t try to make big changes right away,” said Dr. Ancona. “Introduce small changes, and it has to be the whole family changing, not just one child or parent.”