

Our Children Are VERY Unhealthy

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Many people are concerned about the mental health of American children right now. Parents, teachers, doctors, and therapists are reporting unprecedented levels of childhood depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. We need to pay attention to this and do something about it.

But just as alarming is the state of our children's physical health. New research from Children's Hospital of Chicago shows that fewer than one third of children between the ages of 2 and 19 scored well when evaluated using an American Heart Association evaluation tool. The AHA Life's Essential 8 Assessment of eight predictors for measuring heart health includes diet, physical activity, nicotine exposure, sleep duration, weight, cholesterol, glucose levels, and blood pressure.¹

The study included 9888 children. The results are horrifying, and the children's scores worsened with age. Only 2.2% of all of the children in the study were found to have optimal heart health. In the 2-5 age group, only 56.5% of children rated well. In the 6-11 age group, only 22.5% scored well. The adolescent group was worst with only 14% having good heart health scores.

The scores based on diet were low in all age groups. In the youngest age group, heart health scores based on diet were 61 out of a possible score of 100. Again, older children were worse, with adolescents scoring only 18.5 on diet quality.²

This is not the first time that warning bells have been rung concerning children's cardiovascular health. For some time, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has recommended that all children between age 9 and 11 be screening for high plasma cholesterol levels.³ In July 2009, the AAP published guidelines for treating high cholesterol in children. The AAP recommends a diet that includes fruit, vegetables, fish, whole grains, and low-fat dairy products for children over the age of two.⁴

For children at high-risk of cardiovascular disease and who also have high cholesterol levels, pharmacological intervention is recommended if diet alone does not lower LDL levels enough. According to the AAP, children older than 8 years can take bile acid-binding resins, statins, cholesterol absorption inhibitors, and fibrates (which decrease plasma triglyceride levels). The AAP mentions potential referral to a dietitian, and fiber supplements if needed.⁵ Of course, a well-structured plant-based diet would negate the need for fiber supplements.

It is disappointing that the AAP does not provide more specific guidance for pediatricians to help the parents of unhealthy children. Classes teaching diet and lifestyle skills for families, cooking classes for kids, and food tastings in the pediatric

office would be a great start. I've advocated for a very long time for pediatricians to expand their practices to include family health since children and adolescents can't change their diets without assistance. Some enlightened pediatricians are starting to offer these services; more need to as soon as possible.

This information should provide powerful motivation for doctors and parents to work on improving the diets and health of kids. The longer bad habits are practiced, the harder they are to break. Teaching kids the importance of good diet and good health is one of the best investments we can make in our future.

¹ <https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-lifestyle/lifes-essential-8>

² Lloyd-Jones DM, Ning H, Labarthe D et al. "Status of Cardiovascular Health in US Adults and Children Using the American Heart Association's New "Life's Essential 8" Metrics: Prevalence Estimates from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), 2013-2018. *Circulation* 2022 Jun <https://doi.org/10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.122.060911>

³ <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Cholesterol-Levels-in-Children-and-Adolescents.aspx#:~:text=The%20American%20Academy%20of%20Pediatrics,epidemic%20of%20obesity%20in%20children.&text=For%20children%20in%20these%20categories,than%2010%20years%20of%20age>

⁴ Horsley L. "AAP clinical Report on Lipid Screening in Children." *Am Fam Phys* 2009;79(8):703-705

⁵ IBID