

Join Atrium Health Navicent in Observing Pediatric Obesity Awareness Month

'Healthy Me' clinic is focused on helping children maintain a healthy weight

MACON, Ga., Sept. 19, 2022 – In observance of Pediatric Obesity Awareness Month, Atrium Health Navicent encourages parents to make healthy eating habits and exercise a priority for their children.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 14.7 million children and adolescents in the U.S. suffer from obesity, and 19.7 percent of children are considered obese. In Georgia, 34.4 percent of children ages 10-17 are obese, according to America's Health Rankings. The World Health Organization (WHO) considers childhood obesity one of the most serious public health challenges of the 21st century and childhood obesity rates have tripled in the U.S. over the past 30 years.

The CDC defines childhood obesity as adolescents with a body mass index at or above the 95th percentile for children of the same age and sex. Obesity can harm nearly every system in a child's body including the heart and lungs, muscles and bones, and the hormones that control blood sugar and puberty. Being obese increases a child's risk for type 2 diabetes, and obese children may be at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19, according to the WHO.

"Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we've seen an increase in the number of new onset type 2 diabetes cases diagnosed in children. Obesity and abnormal weight gain have also been on the rise as children," said Dr. Jessica R. Hutchins, an Atrium Health Navicent pediatric endocrinologist. "As physicians, we urge parents to help their children learn healthy eating habits and encourage regular exercise, at least a hour each day, not just to control their children's health today, but to instill routines that will last a lifetime."

Many factors contribute to gaining too much weight, including low physical activity levels, poor sleep routines, too much screen time and eating foods high in fat and sugar. Genetics also plays a key role.

"Genetics may help a child overeat and make it harder for someone who may have a genetic component to control their weight just through regular diet and exercise. If you are obese, even if you cut calories, your size may prevent you from exercising," said Dr. Yameika Head, a pediatrician at Atrium Health Navicent. "Obesity is multifactorial and a pediatrician can help evaluate the why's and come up with a plan and solution to help."

Pediatricians are the first line of defense against childhood obesity and Atrium Health Navicent's "Healthy Me" clinic is dedicated to helping children achieve a healthy weight. Through the program, pediatricians monitor progress and spot trouble areas before they become major. Once referred to the program by their regular doctor, children will learn healthy eating and exercise habits, and they also have access to other resources such as mental health counseling.

Parents can also take steps to help their children get back on track:

- **Eating healthier:** Fill your child's plate with fruit and vegetables in place of sugary foods or snacks.
- **Drinking water:** Make sure water is available as a no-calorie alternative to sodas or juice.
- **Exercising daily:** Help your children get 60 minutes of exercise per day. Exercise not only burns calories, but leads to better academic achievement, higher quality sleep and reduced feelings of anxiety.
- **Getting enough sleep:** Get your child to bed at the same time every night, even on weekends, and remove electronic devices at bedtime. Proper sleep can reduce the risk of type 2 diabetes later in life.
- **Setting a good example:** Be a role model of healthy eating, exercise and sleep for your children.

For some children, changes in diet and exercise just aren't enough. In those cases, there are other tools such a bariatric surgery for adolescents ages 13 and older. Even with the surgery, it's the beginning of a long-term weight loss effort.

“Just because you get the weight-loss surgery doesn’t mean that the work stops. Some adults will take medicines to get their weight down. With teens and kids, we don’t have any medicines that can help suppress their appetites,” Head said. “I explain to my patients that bariatric surgery is just a tool to get their weight down so that it’s manageable. It helps with their exercise, and it helps with their diet.”

The Healthy Me clinic is a service of Atrium Health Navicent Children’s Care Downtown Macon, a Facility of Atrium Health Navicent The Medical Center. For more information about services available for children, visit childrenshospitalnh.org.

About Atrium Health Navicent

Atrium Health Navicent is the leading provider of healthcare in central and south Georgia and is committed to its mission of elevating health and well-being through compassionate care. Atrium Health Navicent provides high-quality, personalized care in 53 specialties at more than 50 facilities throughout the region. As part of the largest, integrated, nonprofit health system in the Southeast, it is also able to tap into some of the nation’s leading medical experts and specialists with Atrium Health, allowing it to provide the best care close to home – including advanced innovations in virtual medicine and care. Throughout its 125-year history in the community, Atrium Health Navicent has remained dedicated to enhancing health and wellness for individuals throughout the region through nationally recognized quality care, community health initiatives and collaborative partnerships. It is also one of the leading teaching hospitals in the region, helping to ensure viability for rural health care for the next generation. For more information, please visit www.NavicentHealth.org.

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