Childhood obesity a rising concern

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As an emergency room physician in West Hawaii, state Sen. Josh Green, D-Kohala, Kona, is no stranger to a wide variety of ailments and injuries. But few things worry him as much, he says, as the increasingly serious problem of childhood obesity.

“I often see 12-year-olds with high blood pressure now,” he said Friday evening. “I’m about to go to work, and I’ll probably see one tonight. That’s something I’d never seen before, just a few years ago. We’re getting more and more kids with serious obesity or early diabetes.”

The link between obesity and illnesses like heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes, among others, are well documented, he said. But, researchers are now discovering that the lifestyle patterns that determine whether someone will struggle with weight issues can emerge as early as 2 years old.

“I saw a 2-year-old the other day who weighed 78 pounds,” he said. “My 2-year-old weighs 26 pounds.”

In testimony before the state House Committee on Health during the recently completed session, a representative from the state Department of Health agreed that if Hawaii is to address obesity, it must focus much of its attention on childhood obesity.

“Early childhood is a time to establish good health habits and identify health, behavioral, and developmental conditions,” reads testimony from the department. “One very serious public health problem is the dramatic rise of young children who are overweight and obese. In Hawaii, childhood obesity increased by 38 percent from 1999 to 2009. Sedentary lifestyles combined with an excess of poor dietary choices, including the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages, contribute to the rapid and steady increase of obesity in Hawaii.

“Studies have found that childhood obesity tends to persist into later life and increases the risk for chronic diseases, including diabetes. As a result of the increased risks related to obesity, childhood obesity is becoming a serious public health problem that has adverse and long-lasting consequences for individuals, families and communities.”

Access to affordable, healthy foods, as well as time for physical activity, are things that are in woefully short supply in Hawaii, Green said. That’s why legislators opted this past session to approve a bill — Senate Bill 2778 — that will organize an early childhood obesity task force. The task force will be charged with identifying potential legislation to address obesity, such as taxes on unhealthy foods to discourage poor eating choices, funding for more sidewalks and bicycle lanes to promote a healthy lifestyle, and offering more physical education classes for students.

The task force, which Green said should be selected later this month, will be comprised of 19 members, including representatives from the Board of Education, the department of the attorney general, the American
Heart Association, the American Cancer Association, the American Diabetes Association, the Hawaii
Association for the Education of Young Children, and other groups.

The group has also been appropriated a half-million dollars in funding to collect and analyze Hawaii-specific
early childhood obesity data to identify those children who are at risk, to increase awareness of health
implications of early childhood obesity, and to promote best practices through community-based efforts to
improve health lifestyle choices — such as training and technical assistance for child care providers to promote
exercise, nutrition and the advantages of breastfeeding.

“Obesity is a really big deal,” added Green. “Nationally and globally it’s a problem. From my perspective, we
need mandatory physical education, and things like taking a closer look at advertising from soda companies,
and providing incentives for people to live a healthy lifestyle. The truth is, we have to take a holistic approach to
obesity and diabetes.”

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