



A Program from the National Institutes of Health

Program Description

The United States is facing a potentially devastating public health crisis of overweight and obesity. Nearly one-third of all adults are now classified as obese, a figure that has more than doubled over the last 30 years. Perhaps even more alarming is the staggering effect the epidemic has had on children. In just 30 years, obesity has more than doubled among children ages 2–5 and adolescents ages 12–19, and more than tripled among youth ages 6–11. This translates to an estimated 9 million U.S. children and teens ages 6 - 19 (16 percent) currently overweight. An additional 15 percent are considered at risk of becoming overweight. This phenomenon has directly contributed to outcomes such as the dramatic increase of type 2 diabetes in children—an illness that, though once considered rare in adolescents, is now estimated to account for 8 to 45 percent of newly diagnosed diabetes cases in children and adolescents.

In order to address this increase in overweight and obesity in children, the National Institutes of Health's (NIH) National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), in collaboration with the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), and the National Cancer Institute (NCI) have come together to promote **We Can!** (**W**ays to **E**nhance **C**hildren's **A**ctivity & **N**utrition)—a national public education outreach program on maintaining a healthy weight. Intended to extend the success of Hearts N' Parks, NHLBI's 3-year collaboration with the National Recreation and Park Association, **We Can!** will provide activities and programs that encourage improved nutritional choices, increased physical activity, and reduced screen time in youth ages 8–13.

We Can! is unique among existing youth obesity-prevention initiatives in its focus on programs and activities for parents and families as a primary group for influencing youth audiences. **We Can!** is being implemented through:

- **Community Outreach:** **We Can!** is collaborating with 13 Intensive Community Sites around the country to take an active role in creating healthier hometown environments that promote a healthy weight. Sites comprise parks and recreation departments, State and county health care departments, health care systems, and local coalitions of medical practitioners and city planning groups. These Sites participated in an orientation training and received materials and resources to implement and evaluate **We Can!** Intensive Community Sites are receiving technical assistance to support local partnership and media outreach. In addition, more than 20 other community sites have committed to use and distribute **We Can!** program materials. **We Can!** enables an unlimited number of community sites to receive online access to all materials, including the program poster, its parent handbook in both English and Spanish, a poster, local press releases, and other useful **We Can!** tools. These sites will extend the reach of **We Can!** messages throughout the country.
- **National Media and Messages:** National promotion targets key constituencies with messages that announce **We Can!** and motivate youth and their parents or primary caregivers to take individual and community action to maintain a healthy weight. Messages engage the public in recognizing both individual and environmental factors that influence their attempts to achieve and maintain a healthy weight, and ultimately reduce their risk of

heart disease. Toward these ends, **We Can!** offers English and Spanish materials, such as radio and print public service advertisements, a parent handbook, and a Parent-oriented consumer Web site (<http://wecan.nhlbi.nih.gov>).

- **Partnership Development:** Providing an umbrella theme, materials, and support, **We Can!** has joined forces with other national organizations, including health professional associations, corporations and the media to provide parents and caregivers with the most up-to-date information on the prevention of overweight in children. Organizations collaborating with **We Can!** will tailor their programs and promotions to include **We Can!** materials, messages, and activities.

We Can! encourages youth to:

- Choose a sufficient amount of a variety of fruits and vegetables per day.
- Decrease consumption of high-fat foods and energy-dense foods that are low in nutrient value.
- Enjoy small portions at home and at restaurants.
- Substitute water, fat-free milk, or lowfat milk for sweetened beverages.
- Engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity on most—preferably all—days of the week.
- Reduce sedentary activity by limiting screen time to no more than 2 hours per day.

To support youth in this program, **We Can!** encourages parents and primary caregivers to:

- Increase the availability and accessibility of healthy foods in the home.
- Limit the availability and accessibility in the home of sweetened beverages, high-fat foods, and energy-dense foods with low nutrient value.
- Enjoy small portions at home and at restaurants.
- Support and enable family physical activity.
- Support and enable reduced screen time.

We Can! was designed based on a Strategy Development Workshop, convened in February 2004, with leading researchers, public health experts, nutritionists and dieticians, youth marketing experts, and community center representatives from around the country; a review of the science-based literature on obesity prevention; an environmental scan to review other agency work on overweight and obesity; and an assessment of Hearts N' Parks.

We Can! launched June 1, 2005. The initiative builds on the solid foundation established by NHLBI's Hearts N' Parks, and complements other community-based efforts underway by the Department of Health and Human Services to reduce the burden of preventable disease.

For further information, please contact:

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