

Panel recommends cholesterol screenings for children

By Shari Roan, Los Angeles Times

As Americans – including even young children – continue to get fatter, their risk for heart disease is climbing too. So a panel of experts now is recommending that all kids have their cholesterol checked at least once between ages 9 and 11 and again between 17 and 21.

Although children typically don't have heart attacks and strokes, evidence has been mounting for years that the roots of those diseases begin early in life, and the rising rates of obesity have only fueled the risk.

That means doctors should start looking for signs of future heart disease in all kids, said the authors of a report sponsored by the federal government that is the first comprehensive guide on heart risk management in children.

Such guidelines already exist to address heart disease risk in adults, but until now there has been none outlining what works best for children.

Developed by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute and endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the guidelines were welcomed by heart specialists and pediatricians, who said they were long overdue.

"It's a major step forward," said Dr. Alan Lewis, a pediatric cardiologist at Children's Hospital Los Angeles who was not involved in crafting the report.

The guidelines were several years in the making, said panel chairman Dr. Stephen R. Daniels, pediatrician-in-chief at Children's Hospital Colorado. Its recommendations, published

Friday in the journal *Pediatrics*, are based on studies on all aspects of childhood risk factors for heart disease, carefully graded on the strength of the evidence, he said. Earlier guidelines for child heart health focused on solitary risk factors, such as high blood pressure or weight.

“Heart disease is the No. 1 cause of death in our society,” Daniels added. “We know the process that leads to those deaths begins in childhood. We also know that people who are able to maintain a low risk through childhood and early adulthood have a lower risk.

“If they can reach age 50 with low-risk status, they are very unlikely to have heart disease. That is the payoff here,” he said.

The report was developed to address the predicted upswing in heart disease rates caused by the obesity epidemic, said Dr. Elaine M. Urbina, director of preventive cardiology at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center, who was a member of the panel.

About one-third of American children are overweight or obese, nearly triple the rate in 1963, according to the American Heart Assn. Approximately 17 percent of kids ages 2 to 19 – 12.5 million – are obese.

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