



# Weigh of Life...Taking Action Together

## Introduction

**O**besity is well recognized as a national health crisis. In recent years, its prevalence among the US population has reached unprecedented proportions among both adults and children. While persons of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds have been affected, obesity disproportionately affects ethnic and cultural minorities. For children and adolescents, the increase in overweight has been especially dramatic, and it is the most prevalent and preventable health affliction children face today.

The relationship between overweight and chronic disease is well established, and includes increased risk for cardiovascular disease, diabetes, hypertension and other chronic diseases. Although these health consequences typically are associated with adult populations, many are starting to become common in the overweight pediatric population. In particular, Type II diabetes is being reported at an alarming rate in school-aged children. The most significant link between pediatric overweight and future health risk is the considerable proportion of overweight children who grow to become overweight and obese adults who then face the long-term health consequences of obesity.

It is widely acknowledged that the causes of overweight are complex, difficult to target, and challenging to resolve. Socioeconomic, cultural, environmental, genetic, and behavioral factors all influence the development of overweight and obesity. Even still, health professionals who work with children, particularly very young children, have the opportunity to intervene to prevent overweight. Practitioners and researchers continue to seek more effective nutrition education and counseling strategies that have a positive impact on behaviors to prevent overweight and promote the development of healthy weights in children.

**I**n 2001, the Massachusetts WIC Nutrition Program was awarded a USDA Special Projects Grant entitled, “*Cultural Perspectives on Childhood Overweight among Hispanic WIC Participants in Massachusetts.*” The overall goal of the project was to enhance the ability of the Massachusetts WIC Program nutrition staff to provide culturally-sensitive services that promote healthy eating behaviors, particularly for Dominican and Puerto Rican children, among whom the problem of overweight is particularly acute. The objectives were to:

1. **characterize nutritional status**, body composition, and the prevalence of overweight among Dominican and Puerto Rican children participating in WIC in Massachusetts
2. **increase understanding** of beliefs associated with the Dominican and Puerto Rican cultures regarding what constitutes healthy body weight and its





consistent, positive messages from both WIC and health care providers. This section features the contents and use of the *Weigh of Life...Taking Action Together* Provider Toolkit. The Toolkit includes tools, materials, and posters for health care providers to use in their practices to ensure consistent messages about weight and dietary practices that encourage healthy weights in children. The distribution of the Toolkit is meant to be accomplished by a personal visit from WIC nutritionists. Included in this section are sample dialogues for individual meetings and PowerPoint presentations (with speaker notes) for use in larger meetings or presentations with health care providers.

The Provider Toolkit is targeted to encourage health care providers to:

- assess weight in children and communicate weight status with parents, including discussion of overweight
- provide consistent messages to parents related to dietary patterns and healthy weights
- prescribe and promote WIC for nutrition counseling related to feeding young children

**Steps to Discussing Weight** features a new approach for WIC nutrition counselors to use when initiating discussions with families about a child's weight or overweight. This section helps the WIC nutrition counselor better approach a discussion with parents about their child's weight and features a nine-step technique to use for communicating in a more connecting and sensitive way, setting the stage for behavior change.

**Using Educational Materials to Promote Behavior Change** introduces new emotion-based nutrition education messages and materials to use with WIC families. These nutrition education materials (mini-posters and a child placemat) focus on Dominican and Puerto Rican cultural patterns and beliefs. This section outlines key messages associated with each material and effective ways to introduce and use each material in counseling or group sessions to promote achieving healthy weights in young children.

**Resources** offers selected references and resources on childhood overweight.

**T**here are substantial barriers to overcome when discussing a child's weight with parents and promoting behavior change to achieve healthy weights. WIC nutrition counselors and health care providers need to be capable of handling these challenges. In addition, they need to be aware of cultural issues that influence parents' receptivity to counseling. There is clearly a need for both prevention and treatment strategies that address the issue of childhood overweight. Use this manual as a tool to more effectively coordinate and collaborate with health care providers, and enhance WIC nutrition counselors' ability to interact with families in promoting behavior changes that support healthy weights in children.