Childhood obesity is now the number one health concern among parents in the United States, topping drug abuse and smoking. This is well placed concern given that about one in three American kids and teens today is overweight or obese – nearly triple the rate in 1963.

Obesity is causing a broad range of health problems for children that previously weren’t seen until adulthood. These include high blood pressure, type two diabetes and elevated cholesterol levels. Children today may be the first generation to be less healthy and have a shorter life expectancy than their parents.

Good news - childhood obesity is preventable. Dr. Julian Deese, Medical Director at the Institute for Healthy Living, says kids and parents can start making healthier choices by not falling for these five common myths.

**Myth #1: Breakfast is not important.**

Kids that don’t eat breakfast eat more food and overeat throughout the day. Also studies have shown that breakfast-skippers don’t do as well in school. Kids should start their day with a high protein, natural sugar, breakfast. As a morning time-saver, place cold cereal into bowl at night so in the morning rush all you have to add is lowfat milk, or grab a yogurt or a piece of fruit that can be eaten in the car. **Truth:** Always eat a healthy breakfast, which is fiber plus fruit and protein.

**Myth #2: It doesn’t matter what you drink.**

On average, Americans drink about a pint of soda per day, and soda is loaded with sugar. Drinking a bottle of regular soda is the same as sitting down and eating 16 ¼ sugar cubes. Make healthier and more nutritious choices for kids, like low-fat milk and water. **Truth:** Avoid sugary drinks and aim for eight glasses of water each day.

**Myth #3: It’s okay to skip meals.**

People who eat three healthy meals a day control their weight, perform better in school and perform better in athletics. Eating a healthy meal provides kids with the important nutrients critical to development, behavior and overall health. **Truth:** Eat three meals a day with healthy snacks in between.

**Myth #4: Snacking is a bad thing.**

Eating something nutritious every few hours keeps blood sugar from dropping. This helps with weight maintenance and helps maintain mental and emotional stability. Children have small stomachs but high energy needs, so snacks provide extra nutrition and energy between meals. **Truth:** Nutritious snacks are an important piece of a healthy diet. Try fruit with low-fat cheese or peanut butter on multi-grain bread.

**Myth #5: Sleep isn’t that important.**

Young people need nine to ten hours of sleep a night. People who under-sleep also tend to overeat, and sleepy kids often turn to caffeine and sugar-filled drinks to “wake up.” Setting aside 30 minutes before bedtime as an electronics-free time (no t.v., phone, videogames, etc.) can also lead to a better night’s rest. **Truth:** A good night’s sleep is just as important as nutrition and exercise.

“As a parent, it is our responsibility to ensure the health and safety of our child,” says Dr. Deese. “We decide what foods are brought into the home. It is our responsibility to ensure that our pantries and refrigerators are filled with healthy choices of fruits and vegetables, not high sugar and high fat foods with little nutritional value.”

A recent study from the National Center for Health Statistics concludes that children in the United States all consume too much added sugar. Added sugars (white sugar, corn syrup, honey and more) are sprinkled on at the dinner table and added ingredients in processed and prepared foods. Surprisingly, the study revealed that young people: 1) took in 60 percent of their sugar calories from foods and only 40 percent from soft drinks; and 2) most of their sugar intake was at home, not school or elsewhere. “It is critical that parents read labels and really monitor the amount of sugar they are introducing to their child’s diet.”

Nutrition is only part of the solution – daily exercise is essential. Children and teenagers should be physically active for at least 60 minutes every day, or most days. This may sound like a lot, but don’t worry! There are plenty of easy and enjoyable ways to help your child meet the recommendations.

“It doesn’t have to take a lot of money to burn calories and/or get exercise,” says Dr. Deese. “Play tag, hide and go seek, put on some music and dance, jump rope together, play frisbee, go for walks and bike rides with your children.” Encourage your child to participate in activities that are age-appropriate, enjoyable and offer variety.

Just make sure your child or adolescent is doing three types of physical activity: aerobic, muscle strengthening and bone strengthening. Aerobic activity should make up most of your child’s 60 or more minutes of physical activity each day. This can include either moderate-intensity aerobic activity, such as brisk walking, or vigorous-intensity activity, such as running. At least three days a week include muscle strengthening activities, such as gymnastics or push-ups, and bone strengthening activities, such as jumping rope or running.

Healthy kids also make for healthier adults. “It’s a lot easier to form healthy habits as a youngster than to break bad habits as an adult,” says Dr. Deese. What kids learn now about the importance of diet and exercise will set the tone for life, and good health should be a lifelong habit.