

Historically a health problem among aging adults, after years of poor eating habits, weight gain or inactivity, high blood pressure is now becoming more prevalent among children. The numbers have become so concerning that the American Academy of Pediatrics has developed new recommendations for physicians and patients in an effort to stem the tide.

Dr. Syed Zaidi (ZAY-DEE), a family medicine physician with OSF HealthCare Medical Group in Rockford, says based on the number of patients he sees with the problem, he estimates about five percent of the pediatric population has high blood pressure and that 75 percent of it goes undiagnosed. He welcomes the new guidelines, the first since 2004, that encourage a more proactive approach.

*"We are finding children are more sedentary than they were before," says Zaidi. We're finding an increase in obesity. And it all comes down to how the parents' health conditions are. We are at a point where most parents nowadays, that have children in the pediatric age group, are in that 40, late 30's, early 40 age mix and they're starting to discover their own health issues. And they're seeing how things in their lifestyles have impacted them." Zaidi adds, "And those lifestyles that continue in their home, as to how they parent, what kind of foods they eat, maybe trickling down to effects that we're now seeing in children."*

Dr. Zaidi says he has always screened for high blood pressure in his younger patients. What's changing is the counseling of parents and families to help children be more responsible for their health. It starts with parents leading by example.

*"If you are practicing a healthy lifestyle. That includes a proper, balanced diet - that can be well defined by your provider, as to what may be working best for you," says Zaidi. "That will trickle into effects of what goes on in the home, what's being cooked, what's going on the table and that will trickle down to better outcomes." Zaidi adds, "We can't put everything off to the child because, again, they're children. They do need that guidance and the parents, above schools, above society, above peers are the number one source of how we can impact them."*

High blood pressure can manifest itself in numerous ways, but Dr. Zaidi says there are some overt signs for which parents need to be on the lookout.

*"But if they're active and involved in sports and you find them having difficulty keeping up with their peers more so than they used to, that could indicate some heart problems," says Zaidi. "You know, children do undergo sports physicals - that's through the school and the state. But, sometimes they're just playing in their backyard, playing sports with their neighbors and their colleagues in their backyards or local parks and that doesn't require a sports physical. That doesn't require that screening and pre-evaluation." Zaidi concludes, "So making sure our observant of these symptoms. Is your child complaining of fatigue? Do they have headaches that might be contributing? Do they ever feel like their heart is racing and, you know, you just think they ran up and down the stairs. These little things that can be tell-tale signs."*

Finally, Zaidi advises, it's easy for your doctor to tell you to improve your health and lifestyle. Patients need to ask their physician for specific direction and guidelines to help make the changes as a family and motivate each other.