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High blood pressure growing among kids

By Rob Stein, The Washington Post (Seattle Times), 9/11/07

WASHINGTON — The rate of **health-threatening high blood pressure has started rising among U.S. children** for the first time in decades, researchers reported Monday, a trend long feared by experts worried about the consequences of the obesity epidemic. After dropping steadily since the 1960s, diagnoses of early hypertension and full-blown high blood pressure began creeping up among children and adolescents beginning in the late 1980s as the obesity epidemic apparently began to take its toll, according to an analysis of data collected from nearly 30,000 youths by seven federal surveys.

Although the increases so far have been small — just 1 percent for early hypertension and 2.3 percent for full-blown hypertension — they translate into hundreds of thousands more children developing what often becomes a chronic, lifelong condition. Long considered primarily an affliction of the middle-aged and elderly, high blood pressure is a leading cause of a host of health problems, including heart attacks and strokes — the nation's top killers.

"This is a major public-health problem," said Rebecca Din-Dzietham of the Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta, who led the study, which will be published in the Sept. 25 issue of the American Heart Association journal *Circulation*. "Unless this upward trend in high blood pressure is reversed, we could be facing an explosion of new cardiovascular-disease cases in young adults and adults."

With an adult form of diabetes already being diagnosed more frequently in children and more young people developing high cholesterol, the new finding is another indication that the obesity epidemic is spawning a generation at heightened risk for illnesses that struck their parents and grandparents only later in life, experts said. "This is very worrisome," said Elizabeth Nabel, director of the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute. "This is another piece of evidence suggesting that the obesity epidemic will likely turn into a heart-disease epidemic." Previous research had indicated that the obesity epidemic was driving up blood-pressure levels among children. But the new research is the first to document that the higher levels had begun translating into medically significant high blood pressure and a recently defined condition known as "prehypertension."

"I think we should ... ring the alarm bell," Din-Dzietham said. Din-Dzietham and her colleagues analyzed data collected in nationally representative surveys conducted between 1963 and 2002 by the federal government's National Center for Health Statistics,

involving 29,165 girls and boys ages 8 to 17. The researchers found that the prevalence of childhood obesity drifted slightly but steadily higher between 1963 and 1980, when it started rising rapidly. It affected less than about 6 percent in 1963 but nearly 17 percent by 2002. The proportion of children and adolescents with prehypertension rose from 7.7 percent to 10 percent between 1988 and 2002, while the rate of hypertension increased from 2.7 percent to 3.7 percent. That 1 percent increase translates into an additional 410,150 children nationwide, Din-Dzietham calculated.

Unlike for adults, there is no single reading that constitutes the threshold for high blood pressure and prehypertension for children. Normal blood pressure varies depending on age, sex and height. Researchers believe obesity is the main culprit. Experts recommend children with early hypertension or hypertension be put on a diet-and-exercise regimen to try to lower their blood pressure to safe levels. If that fails, drugs can be prescribed.