

October 8, 2002

The Honorable George W. Bush  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Bush:

A study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published this week in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* shows that obesity rates are still on the rise. The study found that obesity rates in adults have *doubled* and rates in children have *tripled* over the last two decades.

This epidemic of obesity is not due to changes in willpower or genetics. Rather, many aspects of modern life promote overeating and inactivity. Pressures to eat include huge portion sizes, junk food in school vending machines, and ads that encourage us to eat too many calorie-dense foods. Barriers to physical activity include communities designed for driving not walking, labor-saving devices in industry and homes, less physical education in schools, and buildings with prominently placed elevators and hidden stairs.

With all the pressures to eat and less need to be physically active in daily life, it takes more than willpower to maintain a healthy weight. It also will take policy approaches to change the food environment and the built environment (community design, pedestrian infrastructure, etc.) that make it easier for Americans to eat well and be active.

We know, and applaud, your personal interest in physical fitness. We urge you to support policies that would help enable *all* Americans to be fit. There are several measures that deserve your support:

- *Work with Congress to increase FY 2003 funding for the CDC's Division of Nutrition and Physical Activity to \$60 million. Although diet and inactivity kills about the same number of Americans as tobacco, CDC funding for tobacco control is four times that of its nutrition and physical activity program. Your FY03 budget level funds the latter program. We also urge you to include \$100 million for the Division in your FY 2004 budget to allow the CDC to undertake its own national programs and to fund all states for nutrition and physical activity programs;*
- *Restore the CDC's Youth Media Campaign to its original funding level (\$125 million a year). Your FY03 budget zeros out that promising childhood obesity prevention program, which encourages teens to be physically active;*
- *Require calorie labeling on the menus and menu boards of fast-food and other chain restaurants. Informed consumers have a better chance of being slimmer consumers.*

- *Ask Congress to give the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) the authority to reduce junk food in schools and increase the availability of healthful foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains and low-fat milk through the USDA school meals programs;*
- *Strengthen nutrition education in schools, support daily physical education for every school child, and support safe-routes-to-school programs so that children can walk and bike to school;*
- *Support legislation to reduce advertising for low-nutrition, high-calorie foods aimed at young children;*
- *Support increased funding for modes of transportation that involve physical activity like mass transit, bike paths and walking trails; and*

The time to act is now. The rising obesity rates have already caused a 50% increase in diabetes over the last ten years. That increase is ominous given that federal Medicare and Medicaid costs for diabetes are already \$15 billion a year. The costs of diet- and inactivity-related heart disease, cancers, diabetes, stroke, and other diseases also are putting the squeeze on state budgets, businesses, families, and seniors.

Relying solely on personal responsibility and the bully pulpit is too low a dose of treatment to cure this serious health problem. While it may be an inexpensive approach in the short run, it will cost the country more in the long run in prescription drugs, other health-care costs, disabilities, and lost productivity.

We look forward to hearing more about your plans to address obesity and would welcome the opportunity to meet with members of your Administration and share additional information.

*Sincerely,*

*Margo G. Wootan, D.Sc.  
Director, Nutrition Policy*

*Michael F. Jacobson, Ph.D.  
Executive Director*