

# OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Dr. Joseph Baker

## Ten Reasons to Turn Off the TV

*You've heard it all before: Watching too much television is bad for your health. But have you really "tuned in" to the research or simply pressed your own virtual "mute button?"*



Dr. Baker urges patients to seriously consider how television is affecting them and their families. Following are 10 excellent reasons to turn off the tube.

### No. 1: Prevents Obesity

Dr. Baker is concerned about patients' expanding waistlines due, in large part, to too many hours in front of the television set and lack of physical activity. And now, in addition to couch potatoes, there's a new generation of couch spuds: children suffering from morbid obesity and the resulting ill health.

While there are no set guidelines for adults, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children under the age of 2 not watch *any* television and that children 2 years and older be limited to a *maximum* of two hours per day (*Am Fam Physician* 2004;70:1784). But many experts believe that two hours is still far too much. The less tube time, the better.

It's a well-documented fact that the rise in childhood obesity is tightly linked to the increasing number of hours youngsters spend watching television (*Fam Pract News* 2005;35:59). Increased leisure-time television viewing among adults is also associated with obesity, according to the August 2004 issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

There's also a nutrition connection — particularly devastating to children. Research shows that the more television a child watches, the fewer fruits and vegetables he or she consumes. "These associations may be a result of the replacement of fruits and vegetables in youths' diets by foods highly advertised on television." (*J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 2004;43:993.)

To make matters worse, eating in front of the television short-circuits the brain-body connection that signals fullness. This sparks overeating and calorie overload. In a study of 76 undergraduate students from Georgia State University, television viewing was also associated with increased meal frequency and overeating (*Appetite* 2004;42:111-3).

But that's not all. Researchers from the International Diabetes Institute in Melbourne, Australia have discovered a direct link between the television-viewing habits of adults and the development of type 2 diabetes, which is linked with obesity. The researchers found that adults who watched more than 14 hours of television per week

were at a higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes than those who watched less than 14 hours per week. The study included 8,299 men and women aged 25 years or older (*Diabetes Care* 2004;27:2603-9).

### No. 2: Bonds Families

Avoiding the television allows families to connect and explore the world together. Cooking a healthful meal, building a model, playing board games or tossing around a ball are just a few of the bonding activities that can bring a family closer together.

### No. 3: Reduces Violence

Indirect aggression is associated with suppressing anger, emotional outbursts and difficulty with attention control. On the other hand, direct aggression involves acting out in a violent or confrontational manner.

A recent study examined the immediate effect of viewing indirect and direct aggression on 199 children ages 11 to 14 years. The study provided the first evidence that viewing indirect aggression on television can have an immediate impact on subsequent physical aggression among children (*J Exp Child Psychol* 2004;88:234-53).



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This TV/violence connection isn't only due to violent context in shows, according to another group of researchers. Inactivity and social isolation associated with watching television may also contribute to aggression (*J Dev Behav Pediatr* 2003;24:83).

Violence is often portrayed on television as a way to solve problems and handle conflicts: a negative message for both adults and children. Turn the tables by discussing peaceful and constructive challenge-solving with your family.



#### **No. 4: Broadens Attention Spans**

It might appear that a child has a long attention span because he or she can sit for hours watching cartoons. But research shows that too much television actually has the opposite effect.

In a study of 1,278 1-year-olds and 1,345 3-year-olds, the first group watched an average of 2.2 hours of television per day while the second group watched an average of 3.6 hours per day. By the time the children in both groups reached their seventh birthdays, a full 10 percent had attention-span problems (*Pediatr News* 2004;38:20).

Help broaden your child's attention span by limiting TV viewing time and promoting activities that exercise his or her imagination. Reading to, or with, your child is also an excellent way to boost attention span.

#### **No. 5: Improves Sleep**

It's arduous to get a proper night's sleep when your mind is overstimulated by television: particularly when that screen is in the bedroom. Doctors of chiropractic are particularly concerned when patients report tossing and turning all night, because sleep disturbances are associated with

persistent pain syndromes — including back pain (*Spine* 2006;31:51-6).

#### **No. 6: Boosts Brain Power**

Today's television options include a wealth of educational programming. But too much of a good thing can backfire. The more television a child watches, the less time researchers say he or she spends doing homework, studying and reading for leisure. In addition, their behaviors become more impulsive, which results in an eventual drop in their academic achievement (*J Genet Psychol* 2004;165:367).

Another recent study looked at 400 third-graders in California. Those who had televisions in their bedrooms scored eight points lower on tests for math and language arts than those whose bedrooms were TV-free zones (*Am Fam Physician* 2005;72:1442).

#### **No. 7: Helps Safeguard Innocence**

Approximately two-thirds of televised programming contains sexual content, according to a study published last year in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. What does this mean for children? "Watching sex on TV predicts and may hasten adolescent sexual initiation," say researchers (*J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 2005;44:427).

In addition to closely monitoring what your children watch on television, the authors of the above-cited article note that "parents may be able to reduce the effects of sexual content by watching TV with their teenaged children and discussing their own beliefs about sex and the behaviors portrayed."

#### **No. 8: Prevents Smoking...**

When researchers in Belgium surveyed 909 students in their first and fourth years of secondary education, they found that "the relationship between television viewing and age at smoking initiation was significant. Higher levels of television viewing were related to earlier onset of smoking behavior in adolescents." (*Nicotine Tob Res* 2005;7:381-5.)

And here's another finding that may

surprise you: Children were more influenced to smoke by the actors and actresses on television than from peer pressure, parental smoking or gender.

#### **No. 9: ...And Drinking**

In a survey of 500 Finnish youths between the ages of 10 and 17, investigators determined that televised beer advertisements accelerated the frequency of current and future alcohol intake (*Addiction* 1998;93:361-71).

#### **No. 10: Staves Off Burns**

Yes, you read that correctly: Less TV time can prevent fires. Researchers from the Shriners Hospitals for Children in Northern California determined that Saturday-morning television programming — viewed primarily by children — "depicts fire and burn injury as safe or without consequence, thus potentially increasing the incidence of burn injury in children." (*J Burn Care Rehabil* 2004;25:381-5.)

#### **Helpful Hints**

- Encourage the entire family to get involved providing ideas on alternative activities.
- Avoid mega-sized TV sets. And, don't make a TV or media center the focal point of your living space. Instead, hide a smaller set in a cabinet or armoire.
- Watch programs with your kids. Discuss them openly.
- Keep interesting, quick-read reading materials on your coffee table.
- Shut the TV off if you object to the content. Explain why it was offensive or not in line with your family's value system.
- Block objectionable content by using your television system's parental controls.

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