

# Bill Clinton, Health Groups to Tackle Childhood Obesity

*By Alan Mozes*

*HealthDay Reporter by Alan Mozes*

*healthday Reporter Fri Feb 20, 11:47 pm ET*

THURSDAY, Feb. 19 (HealthDay News) -- In what they called a "landmark agreement," former President Bill Clinton and the American Heart Association announced Thursday the launch of a national initiative on childhood obesity, aimed at getting up to 6 million American kids covered for routine visits to both primary care physicians and dietitians.

"I think we want the children of America to know, No. 1, that we want them to be healthy, we want them to grow up healthy, and we want them to start now," Clinton told reporters at his foundation's headquarters in New York City.

The new collaboration, which Clinton called "a really big deal," links medical organizations like the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Dietetic Association with insurance companies such as Aetna, WellPoint, Blue Cross of North Carolina and of Massachusetts and private companies like PepsiCo, Owens Corning and Paychex. This, Clinton said, is "the first time our three stakeholders have come together to tackle childhood obesity in a comprehensive way."

The current initiative aims to address the obesity-related healthcare needs of almost 1 million children in the program's first year, by reimbursing doctors and registered dietitians for providing health care and in-depth nutritional counseling to kids on an ongoing basis. In addition, participating companies will offer their employees access to the initiative's benefits. The new alliance will also offer parents educational and nutritional information on tackling childhood obesity.

The planned coverage is set to ratchet up to approximately 6.2 million children (25 percent of all overweight American children) by the end of three years.

Observing that millions of American families simply don't know where to turn for help on their child's weight issues -- or just can't afford the help when they find it -- Clinton said he hoped that the new initiative would address what for many parents is "somewhere between a problem and a nightmare."

The new effort, called the "Alliance Healthcare Initiative," is the latest venture of The Alliance for a Healthier Generation, created in 2005 by the AHA and the William J. Clinton Foundation. In 2006, the Alliance helped shepherd an agreement among soft drink manufacturers that established sweetener, calorie and fat guidelines, and limited the sale of sodas in elementary, middle, and high schools attended by 35 million American students.

For his part, AHA president Dr. Tim Gardner described the new initiative as "a very historic moment" and one that is needed as the nation's medical system becomes increasingly burdened by obesity-related costs amid growing economic hardship.

He noted that the direct health care costs for the treatment of children who are already overweight or obese currently tops \$14 billion annually, and, overall, obesity costs the nation an estimated \$117 billion annually in both healthcare costs and lost productivity.

"We're here today because there is an obesity epidemic in this country," Gardner said. "One in three teens in this country are overweight or obese. "And, he added, "there's a risk that this generation will be the first in our history to have a shorter lifespan than their parents."