PUBLIC SPLIT ON GOVERNMENT ROLE IN ADDRESSING ADULT OBESITY;  
CHILDHOOD OBESITY IS A DIFFERENT STORY

Public Willing To Pay Higher Taxes, Support More Physical Education, and Ban Unhealthy Vending Machines In Schools To Fight Obesity in Children

(Boston, MA) – Americans are divided about the extent to which government should be involved in fighting obesity in general, and they remain selective of the types of initiatives they would support to reverse current trends. However, that division does not extend to children, according to a new poll. Americans appear more willing to embrace more pro-active actions to fight obesity in children, including paying higher taxes, supporting more physical education, and limiting the products school vending machines can offer.

The findings, released today at a meeting in Boston sponsored by The Harvard Forums on Health, the journal *Health Affairs*, and The New America Foundation, come amid growing evidence that obesity is taking on epidemic proportions in the U.S. Today some 30 percent of American adults are obese, weighing at least 30-40 pounds above their ideal weight; 15 percent of American children are obese. An economic analysis recently pegged the cost of treating health conditions linked to being overweight and obese at more than $93 billion a year, and a number of studies are exposing strong links between obesity and a host of illnesses, including cancer.

Although Americans are less supportive of measures to curb obesity that seem too heavy-handed or limit personal choice, they are much more open-minded about the tools needed to fight childhood obesity in particular.

“The American people seem ready to act on the problem of childhood obesity, and they are receptive to government leading the way,” says David Blumenthal, MD, director of the Harvard Interfaculty Program on Health Systems Improvement, which organized the forum. “This is an opening that policy-makers should not ignore,” he adds.
The poll was conducted for The Harvard Forums on Health by the Washington DC-based polling firm Lake Snell Perry & Associates (LSPA). It attempted to gauge attitudes toward obesity and examine the extent to which the public would support a number of policies now before state legislatures, the Bush Administration, and Congress to address obesity. LSPA conducted a random telephone survey of 1,002 adults between May 28 and June 1, 2003. The margin of error was plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

Half of those surveyed believe obesity is a public health problem that society needs to solve and half view it as a personal responsibility or choice issue that should be dealt with privately.

People seem to put the most faith in fighting obesity in their own medical provider. Three quarters of the public believe healthcare providers, including doctors and nurses, have a major role in addressing the obesity epidemic. The finding should be a wake-up call to doctors and others in the medical community who have been criticized for lacking enough training or skill to deal with obesity and failing to be pro-active enough with overweight patients.

**Public Education Versus Special Taxes**

When it comes to discouraging unhealthy eating habits, few people are ready to support special taxes on junk food so that healthier food would be cheaper in comparison, even if the money would be funneled to programs to fight obesity. Only 41 percent of those polled said they would support a special tax on junk food. In contrast, almost six in 10 said they opposed such a policy.

There was more support for mandates on restaurants. Sixty two percent of those polled said they would support a law requiring restaurants to list calorie counts and other nutritional information on their menus. However, support for this measure is not terribly strong; only 37 percent say they strongly support such a move. Recently, Tommy Thompson, the Secretary of the Department of Health & Human Services, rejected such a mandate as unnecessary.

The public is much more supportive of educational campaigns and community redesign efforts to encourage physical activity. Three quarters of those surveyed support government-funded advertising campaigns that promote eating right and exercising, and that warn against the public health risks of obesity. Eighty one percent of those surveyed support the idea of creating more public spaces where people can be physically active.

**Childhood Obesity, A Serious Problem Demanding Government Intervention**

The public is willing to take bolder steps to fight childhood obesity. Support is very strong for efforts to educate parents about the implications of obesity in children, healthier eating habits, and exercise for kids. More than 90 percent of those surveyed
support those efforts. The public also feels strongly about keeping kids active and eating more balanced lunches. In addition:

- Ninety one percent of those surveyed said there should be more physical education in school.
- Ninety five percent said that schools should provide a healthier lunch option than they do today.
- Schools are seen as major players in addressing obesity. Two-thirds of Americans believe schools should play a major role in helping to fight the obesity problem.

The public also shows fairly strong support for more far-reaching measures than education or healthier lunches. Nearly 60 percent of those surveyed support the idea of barring the sale of unhealthy foods and drinks like soda, chips, and candy in school vending machines, a step that some 23 states are pushing, including Maine and California. Another 58 percent of those polled support limiting television advertisements for unhealthy foods and drinks that are targeted specifically to children.

Although special taxes on food are not an appealing option for fighting obesity in general, most Americans seem willing to put tax dollars behind efforts to curb the problem among children. Three quarters (76 percent) of those surveyed would support measures to reduce childhood obesity even if it means higher taxes. Four of 10 say they would be willing to pay up to $100 a year in additional taxes if funds were being used to curb obesity rates in children.

“When it comes to fighting childhood obesity, Americans seem willing to invest their hard-earned tax dollars. Americans seem to understand the importance of investing in the health of their children for the long term,” says Harvard Forums Director Blumenthal.

Copies of survey “Obesity as a Public Health Issue: A Look at Solutions,” can be obtained by calling Eliza Brinkmeyer at Burness Communications at 301/652-1558, x208, by e-mailing her at ebrinkmeyer@burnesscommunications.com, or by visiting The Harvard Forums on Health website at www.phsi.harvard.edu.