

News Release

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**HHS, USDA TAKE NEXT STEP IN OBESITY FIGHT, SECRETARIES
THOMPSON AND VENEMAN MEET WITH LEADERS FROM FOOD
INDUSTRY**

HHS Secretary Tommy G. Thompson and Department of Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman today met with officials from the National Restaurant Association and the National Council of Chain Restaurants to begin dialogue about how the food and beverage industries can help Americans combat obesity, which has reached epidemic proportions.

The meeting, the first in a series of talks with various representatives, comes one week after HHS released new data indicating that nearly one-third of all adults in the United States now classify as obese, and that 15 percent of children and teens aged 6 to 19 - close to 9 million children - are overweight. It also follows up on a commitment by the Bush Administration, through its HealthierUS Initiative, to examine new ways to educate Americans about balancing diets and physical activity to promote healthy lifestyles.

"I am calling on leaders from the food and beverage industry to aid us in our fight against obesity," Secretary Thompson said. "Overweight and obesity are at an all-time high in America and the public health consequences are enormous. At HHS, we aim to lead by example. We must act now, and act together, in order to improve the health of our country's adults and children."

"Bringing various industries together to promote balanced diets and healthier lifestyles is important as we look at more aggressive ways to fight obesity in America," Secretary Veneman said. "At USDA, our goal is to work together in partnership with all sectors to strengthen our ability to reach consumers about these important lifestyle decisions."

The meeting with industry leaders marks the beginning of a long-term collaboration seeking to deliver healthy food choices to the American public by providing easy-to-understand nutritional information, integrating healthiness into mass marketing strategies, and offering an increased variety of healthy meals.

In the near future, the two Secretaries will also be engaging other organizations to help combat the obesity epidemic, including fruit and vegetable growers, grocery manufacturers, public health groups, and state leaders through the National Governors Association and the National Conference of State Legislatures, as well as physical fitness groups and educators.

"Poor eating habits and lack of physical activity are associated with 300,000 deaths each year, and many more individuals experience lower quality of life," Secretary Thompson said. "Overweight and obesity also go hand in hand with diabetes. Type 2 diabetes, usually a disease of adults, is now appearing in children. We must arm Americans with the tools they need to eat responsibly and choose healthy behaviors."

Highlights of the new data released by HHS last week indicate that:

- 31 percent of adults 20 years of age and over - nearly 59 million people - have a Body Mass Index (BMI)* of 30 or greater, compared to 23 percent in 1994;

- More adult women are obese (33 percent) than men (28 percent), with the problem greatest among non-Hispanic black women (50 percent) compared to Mexican-American women (40 percent) and non-Hispanic white women (30 percent); and

- More than 10 percent of younger pre-school-aged children between ages 2 and 5 are overweight, up from 7 percent in 1994.

To help fight the rising trend of overweight and obesity, HHS and USDA have launched several efforts during the past year. HHS's efforts include: "VERB: It's What You Do" Youth Media Campaign in July 2002, which encourages 9 to 13 year-olds to be physically active and engaged in their communities. Also, Secretary Thompson, in partnership with ABC Radio Networks, launched "Closing the Health Gap," a nationwide campaign targeted towards communities of color to help raise awareness about many health disparity areas, particularly diabetes - most often associated with overweight and obesity.

Source: Marquette University Libraries; Tommy G. Thompson Collection; Series 9-2: Health and Human Services (HHS) Speeches

In addition, earlier this year, HHS and USDA launched a new, reinvigorated partnership with the "5-A-Day for Better Health Campaign," which emphasizes the importance of eating five to nine servings of fruits and vegetables daily. And in August Secretaries Veneman and Thompson launched a "Walk For Better Health" initiative to promote more physical activity among the federal workforce and consumers.

Also, USDA has spearheaded several initiatives aimed at combating the growing prevalence of overweight and obese children in America. Among current USDA initiatives are the "Eat Smart.Play Hard*" campaign for schools; a 48-state nutrition education program for food stamp recipients; an action kit for community organizers titled "Changing the Scene: Improving the School Nutrition Environment;" and a \$6 million grant to 100 schools to provide fresh produce during the school day.

These disease prevention and health promotion campaigns underscore the administration's HealthierUS Initiative, launched by President Bush in June 2002. The campaign focuses on improving overall health through regular physical activity, proper nutrition, preventive screenings, and healthy lifestyle choices.

Overall, the President's fiscal year 2003 budget for HHS provides more than \$16 billion for disease prevention programs and research for children and adults. It also provides record-level funding for USDA's Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, as well as increased funding for other child nutrition programs. Last year, USDA provided more than \$7 billion for activities to directly support consumption of fruits and vegetables by children and low-income families.

For more information on the HealthierUS Initiative, and for information on children's health, visit www.healthierus.gov and www.childrenshealth.gov. For details on the "VERB: It's What You Do" Youth Media campaign, go to www.verbnow.com. More information on USDA's nutrition programs can be found at www.gns.usda.gov.

*Note: The BMI is a single number that evaluates an individual's weight status in relation to height. BMI is generally used as the first indicator in assessing body fat and has been the most common method of tracking weight problems and obesity among adults. BMI is a mathematical formula in which a person's body weight in kilograms is divided by the square of his or her height in meters (i.e., $wt/(ht)^2$). The

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BMI is more highly correlated with body fat than any other indicator of height and weight. The criteria for obesity is the same for both men and women. Someone who is 5'7" is obese at 192 pounds and a person who is 5'11" is obese at 215 pounds.