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Fast food blamed for child obesity

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FAST-FOOD, couch potato lifestyles are endangering the health of the nation's children with more than 20 per cent of 15 year olds now obese, according to official government figures out yesterday.

Nearly 10 per cent of six year olds are also dangerously overweight. The rapid rise in childhood obesity is being blamed on poor eating habits and lack of exercise by the young.

Experts from the Health Development Agency said parents and children needed to work together on diet and exercise advice to prevent the next generation from being dogged by fat and health issues.

Obesity kills around 30,000 people every year and costs the NHS an estimated £2.6 billion — a figure expected to rise to £3.6 billion by 2010. Melanie Johnson, the Public Health Minister, called on food manufacturers and retailers to continue looking at the content of foods and providing better information.

Professor Mike Kelly, the HDA's director of research and information, said levels of obesity were rising.

"Our individual choices are not the only cause of this tide of obesity.

"We live in an 'obesogenic' environment — a plethora of fast food outlets, reliance on cars, and offers enticing us to eat larger portions all contribute to the problem," he said.

Prof Kelly said that simple measures such as walking instead of driving and simply being more active, could tackle the so-called obesity epidemic.

He said the problem was also a health inequality issue, with lower social classes most at risk.