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Op-Ed Columnist

Mike Huckabee Lost 110 Pounds. Ask Him How.

By Nicholas D. Kristof

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. -- In 2003, Mike Huckabee, the governor of Arkansas, learned he had type 2 diabetes.

His doctor told him he would probably be dead in 10 years -- and that terrified him enough to start exercising, eschew sugar and lose about 110 pounds (at 5 feet 11 inches, he's now 180 pounds). His first attempts at jogging left him dizzy after a few hundred yards, but now he is running marathons.

That would be a nice, inspiring tale if it ended there, but instead it has been the starting point. Mr. Huckabee has become a health care policy wonk, and with the help of national experts he has begun a series of clever initiatives to fight obesity. They are among the most creative steps under way in America at any level of the political process.

Arkansas has become a national laboratory for using policy levers to try to encourage healthier lifestyles. Other states and the federal government should adopt the same steps -- like curbing soft drinks in schools, informing all parents of their children's body mass index as a step to encouraging fitness, giving exercise breaks as well as smoking breaks, paying for preventive health checks like mammograms and prostate examinations, subsidizing efforts to quit smoking and seeking to give food stamps more purchasing power when they are used to buy fruits or vegetables.

I know all this sounds banal. Perhaps I should be using this journalistic real estate to thunder about grand issues like the Iraq war or Middle East peace or corruption in Congress. But remember that fat kills far more Americans than terrorists. Indeed, The New England Journal of Medicine reported last year that because of rising obesity, life expectancy in the U.S. might soon stop rising and could drop.

So if our government wants to keep our children safe, it doesn't just have to go after terrorists in Afghanistan. It also has to go after Twinkies at home.

Mr. Huckabee, the current chairman of the National Governors Association, is a conservative Republican (and a potential candidate for president in 2008), with whom I disagree on just about everything. But he's doing more to safeguard the lives of his constituents than just about any politician in the country. And it makes financial sense.

"I don't want to be the sugar sheriff," Mr. Huckabee explained in an interview in his office. "I don't want to be the grease police. That's not my job. But when I look at our state budget, and I see that every year our Medicaid budget is increasing by 9 to 10 percent, and I look at state

employees' health plans and I see that those costs are escalating at double digits and twice the rate of inflation -- as a fiscal manager, I have not only the right but frankly also the responsibility to see what can we do to improve this bottom-line cost."

Repeatedly, Mr. Huckabee came back to the same argument: Obesity is reducing not only the quality of life of Americans, but also the fiscal soundness of our government and the competitiveness of our businesses.

"This year, G.M. will spend more on health care for employees and pensioners than on steel," Mr. Huckabee noted. "Starbucks will spend more on health care than on coffee beans."

Obesity is linked to 112,000 deaths a year in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and leads to an extra \$75 billion in direct medical costs. Mr. Huckabee argues that it would be worth paying small sums -- for a session with a fitness trainer or a diet counselor -- to avoid paying the far greater costs of heart disease and diabetes later.

Consider type 2 diabetes -- the ailment that afflicted Mr. Huckabee (but which has now gone away, thanks to his regimen of salads and exercise). It has increased tenfold among children in just the last 20 years.

As a series in this newspaper about diabetes recently noted, one-third of today's 5-year-olds in America are projected to get diabetes at some point in their lives. It's already the leading cause of blindness, and a 10-year-old who has diabetes loses 19 years of life expectancy.

Imagine if Al Qaeda had resolved to attack us not with conventional chemical weapons but by slipping large amounts of high-fructose corn syrup into our food supply. That would finally rouse us to action -- but in fact it's pretty much what we're doing to ourselves.

So what practical steps do we take? That's on the menu for a forthcoming column.