

Childhood obesity and the Indian kid



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EVER noticed the bulging waistlines of children munching on greasy burgers or pizzas in fast-food joints?

Obesity among children is becoming a huge health challenge in the 21st century, and the millennial children seem to be at risk.

The physical and emotional problems with obesity not only impacts individual children and their families, but they also affect society as a whole.

According to the Health Promotion Board-Ministry of Health Clinical Practice Guidelines on obesity in 2016, 12 per cent of Singapore schoolchildren were obese and states that, based on abdominal fatness, Indians had the highest rates of obesity (the State of Obesity in Singapore report 2017).

Indian children have a genetic predisposition to truncal obesity (fat around the belly area) which has harmful health effects.

We seem to live in an “obesogenic” environment where there is a natural predisposition for children to add on

weight. Intake of calorie-dense fast foods and sweetened drinks which are served in the ever-growing number of fast-food joints, increase in consumption of snacks and larger meal portions and decrease in physical activity seem to be the major culprits.

A reduction in sleep time has also been implicated. Many of our children seem to be morphing into couch potatoes watching television and playing electronic games.

Often obese children face emotional and psychological issues as they are often the target of teasing or bullying which can lead to a low self-esteem and depression.

More troubling is the fact that it can lead to diabetes, high blood pressure, severe heart disease and sleep disorders.

Certain types of cancer, including endometrial, oesophagus, stomach and liver cancers are two to four times more likely to occur in obese individuals of both sexes. Overweight children grow

to be overweight adults and they face a significant mortality risk.

A few years ago, I was faced with this nightmare scenario when I received a call from the emergency department stating that a young, very obese 22-year-old had collapsed after a massive heart attack and they were resuscitating him.

After he was revived, he was urgently taken for an angiogram and had an emergency triple-bypass procedure. He was discharged and sent home after a lengthy hospital stay due to many complications that arose due to his obesity.

Interestingly, the first thing that he wanted after his operation was a cola drink to wet his mouth!

In a study of 548 children over a 19-month period, the likelihood of obesity increased 1.6 times for every additional soft drink consumed (Relation between consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks and childhood obesity: a prospective, observational analysis).



So, it becomes parental responsibility to get children away from junk food and sweetened beverages and to replace them with well balanced meals laden with vegetables, fruits and lean meat.

Encouraging at least 60 minutes of moderate to intense physical activity every day, walking/biking to school and climbing stairs, getting adequate sleep and cutting down on screen time will go a long way in preventing fat accumulation.

It is encouraging to note that government and policy makers in Singapore are targeting this emerging problem.

However, it is our responsibility to teach our children to eat right and act right to keep the fat demon at bay.

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Sources: Health Promotion Board-Ministry of Health Clinical Practice Guidelines: Obesity
The State of Obesity in Singapore; Relation between consumption of sugar-sweetened drinks and childhood obesity: a prospective, observational analysis