

Childhood Obesity

Childhood obesity is one of the most serious public health challenges of the 21st century. The problem is global and is steadily affecting many countries, particularly in urban settings. The prevalence has increased at an alarming rate. Overweight and obese children are more likely to stay obese into adolescence and adulthood. Agnes Wong, dietitian, National Healthcare Group Polyclinics, reports.

The consequences of childhood obesity

Being obese has many adverse consequences, which include psychosocial difficulties such as discrimination from peers, a negative self-image, depression, and decreased socialisation. In the past the health consequences of childhood overweight were thought to be manifested in adulthood, but current evidence shows that many overweight children have one or more cardiovascular risk factors such as hyperlipidaemia, hypertension, or hyperinsulinemia. An even more dramatic health consequence of overweight is the rapid increase in the incidence of type 2 diabetes in children, which has a serious impact on adult health, development of other chronic diseases and health care costs. For these reasons, actions to prevent obesity should begin early in life.

Causes of childhood obesity

The fundamental cause of childhood overweight and obesity is an energy imbalance between calories consumed and calories expended. This may be due to unhealthy eating and physical inactivity. A child may take too many calories with energy-dense foods more readily available. The increasingly sedentary nature of our modern lifestyle, such as the convenience of modern transport, spending more time playing computer and video games, and watching television, decreases the physical activity of a child.

Prevention and management of childhood obesity

Management of obesity in children should include considerations of nutrient needs for growth. The best way to achieve this is by making small but permanent changes in eating habits and physical activity, instead of drastic and short-term changes that probably will not last long.

Here are some recommendations, which involve changes in diet and physical activity to promote a healthy weight. Some therapy strategies for children require parental and family involvement.

- Do not put your child on an overly restrictive diet that completely forbids favourite foods, as this is likely to fail. It is better to allow small amounts of chocolate, ice-cream or titbits once a week than not at all. Also, reduce the fat intake rather than the total amount of food eaten. In this way, it reduces calories without making your child feel overly hungry. You can reduce calories from fat by using less oil in cooking, and offering your child low fat and nutritious snacks such as low fat yoghurt, fresh fruits or plain crackers.

- Record diet and exercise patterns in a diary to keep track of types and amount of foods eaten and exercise performed as well as the location and time that foods are eaten and exercise takes place. The diary is useful to determine any problem areas in eating and exercise behaviour.
- Identify high risk situations (such as having high calorie foods in the house), and consciously avoid them. Watching TV during mealtime is another high risk situation that encourages eating every time the TV is on. Children should be encouraged not to eat while doing other activities such as watching television or reading.
- Encourage children to eat slowly.
- High bulk foods will help to increase the feeling of satiety if eaten first.
- It may help to give a child a smaller plate so that their meal appears bigger.
- Energy-dense foods should not be readily accessible to the child. Second servings and desserts should be limited.
- Replace snacking with other activities, such as bike riding.
- Reward specific positive actions. Examples of such action include achieving an exercise duration goal or eating less of a certain type of food.
- Rewards or achieving goals can be decided by children and parents together, and should revolve around something that encourages positive behaviour. For example, giving sporting equipment as a reward may encourage more physically active behaviour.
- Avoid using food as a reward, especially high calorie foods. Using them as reward may only make them more desirable. Parents and health professionals should regularly use verbal praise.
- Change unrealistic goals and false beliefs about weight loss and body image to realistic and positive ones.
- The family can work as a team to set weekly activity goals. Parents can also help a child adopt or maintain a positive attitude about new behaviours in addition to helping the child cope with any negative remarks from peers.

Keep in mind that a diet good for the obese child is just as good for the rest of the family. In fact, the whole family can benefit from a healthier diet and a more active lifestyle. If you are concerned about your child's weight, you can consult a dietitian about achieving and maintaining an appropriate weight for your child. You can also see a pediatrician for advice.