



CHILDREN'S HEALTH: OBESITY

"South Africa, defined as a developing country, is seeing a rising trend in childhood obesity. Africa has the fastest growth rates of obesity among pre-school children and South Africa in particular is among the countries with the highest child obesity rates," says Prof. Anita Pienaar, of the School of Biokinetics, Sport en Recreation, and programme leader within the Kinderkinetics program at the North-West University (NWU), Potchefstroom Campus.

Over 15% of children between birth and 19 years old are considered overweight or obese. "However, this prevalence does not give a true reflection of the problem as it is masked by differences between age groups, boys and girls, ethnic groups, and geographical areas," adds Anita.

Dangers of childhood obesity

Childhood obesity is a difficult disease to cure; once children become obese they are predisposed to obesity for the rest of their lives. Obese kids may also be prone to low self-esteem if they have been teased, bullied, or rejected by their peers. They may be more likely than average-weight kids to develop eating disorders and be more prone to depression.

The question is what can parents do to prevent their children from becoming part of the statistics.

It all starts at sunrise

Parents want to give their kids the best advantage in every aspect of life, and

Obese children are especially vulnerable to the side-effects associated with obesity, such as adverse health risks, and developmental shortcomings because of their young age and consequently earlier exposure to unhealthy lifestyles and chronic conditions says Anita Pienaar, author of a study published in BMC Obesity 2015. Reference: <http://bmcobes.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40608-014-0030-4>

breakfast is the easiest way. Studies show that children who eat a good breakfast perform better in school, pay more attention, are more creative, think better and score higher on tests than children who don't. Children who eat breakfast are also less likely to be overweight.

Choose a breakfast with milk, fruit and whole grain cereal like All Bran, wholewheat Pronutro or oat bran or give them

wholewheat bread with peanut butter. Breakfast is a healthy habit to start at a young age and carry into adulthood.

Food is on the table

After-school activities, late workdays, meetings, traffic, no time for dinner - sounds familiar? This is the typical scenario for many households these days! Our fast paced lives leave us little time for healthy meals that are shared with everyone in the family.

Yet studies show that the family dinner hour is an important part of healthy living. If it is impossible, set a goal and aim for twice a week and build from there. Kids need schedules and routine. A good solution is planning meals ahead. Make healthy meals in bulk and freeze them in portions for the days when there is no time to prepare dinner. Reheat and serve! This will help to avoid picking up the phone and calling the number on the fridge for that unhealthy but oh-so convenient pizza!

Get the family involved. Let kids help



When younger kids frequently eat dinner with their families, they are less likely to be overweight than other children. Having a regular mealtime to spend quality time together is very important.

prepare meals and teach them about healthy foods choices. Neither you nor your children will regret the time and energy put into making mealtime a time to gather around the table.

It is also important to discourage eating meals or snacks while watching TV. Eating in front of the TV may make it difficult to pay attention to feelings of fullness and may lead to overeating.



Sweet tooth

It is impossible to shield your child from sugar because it is everywhere and in virtually everything we eat. Your job is to teach them how not to abuse it. Try not to expose your kids to candy, sugar and all sorts of sweets (even fruit juice) for as long as possible.

Early exposure to sweets impairs development of other tastes and an appreciation for natural fruits and vegetables. Cold drinks high in sugar and other calories are low in nutrition and have been linked to obesity.

The easiest way to prevent this is to keep sweets and soft drinks out of the house. However, completely denying children sugar will only make it more tempting.

Don't reward kids for good behaviour or try to stop bad behaviour with sweets or treats. Come up with other solutions to

modify their behaviour. Find alternatives for processed sugary foods like fresh or dried fruit, nuts, or whole-grain pancakes or waffles served with fresh fruit slices, peanut butter and a little honey.



Bye bye junk food

Junk food is one of the culprits for the obesity epidemic. Kids are exposed to junk food in many ways, from unhealthy parental role models to fast food advertising. Kids are also offered poor food choices at school. Eating excessive amount of these foods leads to obesity and malnutrition. Processed foods, though convenient, are often loaded with fat, salt, and sugar, and low on vegetables, fruits and other natural food. These foods are robbing kids of essential vitamins and minerals.

Children in their growing age need a lot of vitamins and iron. High consumption of fast food also makes children more prone to illnesses like loss of appetite, constipation, tiredness, fatigue, lack of concentration and diseases caused due to vitamin deficiencies.

As parents stop buying junk food and start preparing healthy meals to set a habit for children early on. Set nutrition guidelines for your children and enforce them by packing lunches and staying firm when grocery shopping.

Put down that remote

Many kids are spending less time exercising

and more time in front of the TV, computer, or on their play stations. Kids who watch more than four hours a day are more likely to be overweight compared with kids who watch two hours or less. Not surprisingly, TV in the bedroom is also linked to being overweight. Many kids spend all their free time in front of one screen or another.



Children need to be active every day to promote their healthy growth and development. Physical activity has been associated with increased academic performance, self-concept, mood, and mental health, the promotion of physical activity and exercise may also improve quality of life. Kids who establish healthy lifestyle patterns at a young age will carry them – and their benefits – forward for the rest of their lives.

Make healthy eating and exercise a family affair and support and encourage your children to participate in active play and sports on most days.

Recommendations for physical activities for children, include at least an hour of dedicated outdoor active time a day.

Lead by example

Preventing kids from becoming overweight means adapting the way your family eats and exercises, and how you spend time together. Helping kids lead healthy lifestyles begins with parents who lead by example.