

CATCH THEM YOUNG

Ironically, while malnutrition persists, problem of childhood obesity is also fast emerging. A lot of parents are increasingly seeking medical help because their child has the problem of obesity. According to statistics from urban areas in South India, 21.4 per cent of boys and 18.5 per cent of girls aged between 13 and 18 are either overweight or obese. If this trend continues in another 10 yrs the number of obese children is going to double. Moreover, 80 per cent of overweight children in the age group of 10 to 14 years are at risk of becoming overweight adults.

The risk of getting hypertension, diabetes, heart problems, liver, orthopedic, respiratory, reproductive and psychological problems among obese children, when they become adults, is also high.

The reasons for obesity during childhood are:

Overfeeding: Good eating habits have to be inculcated from the time a child is weaned from the mother's milk by including nutritious homemade food that are high in fiber in their daily diet. A bottle-fed child definitely takes in more milk as compared to a breast-fed infant. Excessive milk intake with little solids has been associated with over-weight babies. Such children up till about two years have been reported with a weight varying from 17 to 20 kg. An increasing number of baby foods are being marketed. The media portrays a healthy 'baby' fed on such products, so obviously the parent is lured to feed their child with them. No doubt, they taste good due to the variety of flavors available, but are consumed in excess and for prolonged periods. It is easy for the mother to mix and feed rather than make an effort to prepare home-based diets and feed. The variety of such products being manufactured and heavily advertised through the media (e.g. pictures of large sodas with snacks etc) makes the young child compel the parents to procure these items and he keeps munching them anytime and anywhere. Not surprisingly, the child misses regular meals. The temptation of little surprise gifts with the products traps children. Wafers, chocolates, crunchies, specially flavored *namkeen*, *kurkure*, burgers, pizzas; noodles are easily available in every nook and corner. Most of these items are high on calories and they are devoid of other important nutrients like vitamins, iron, calcium etc.

Social factors: Increasing per capita income of the middle income groups has led to an increase in the trend of social gatherings, functions, and celebrations over a couple of decades. Whether in school or at home, feasting has become an important aspect of any activity.

In school, children celebrate their birthdays by getting sweets and pastries (that are often high calories) for their classmates. Parents of children who may not like to spend so much may be forced to do so at the insistence of their child, who in turn is influenced by their friends. The increasing popularity of 'dining out' is a trend that follows western eating habits. Increased availability of fast foods results in an increased volume of food obtained away from home, which may adversely affect the nutritional quality of the diet. Better taste, ready availability, reasonable cost and more convenient, were the reasons quoted by adolescents on various surveys. Biscuits, wafers, *namkeen* are always casually munched while either just watching television at home or a movie in a cinema hall or just loitering in the school or college campus.

In certain families, the eating pattern itself is such that meals are rich in fats and consumption of sweets and desserts are a regular feature. Such habits are automatically passed on to the children. Most often, children are given pacifiers in the form of chocolates, biscuits, noodles etc by parents who leave them back home with the care of baby sitters to make up for the guilt of not being able to devote adequate time to them. These practices gradually lead to children getting addicted to such foods.

Television/computer: Most parents have no control over their children watching various television programs as both of them are employed. Children have access to video games and computers; also mushrooming cyber joints have made these accessible. This contributes to the child becoming a 'couch potato' rather than spending that time in outdoor activity. Consequently, children are gaining more weight than they should. This leads to problems of poor vision, lack of self-confidence and poor scholastic performance. Parents also tend to exploit availability of video games and television in order to meet their own commitments of partying, socializing etc by leaving the children at the mercy of the small screen.

Lack of activity: A significant change responsible for obesity is the lack of exercise that children nowadays get. Earlier, children had more time to play, run about or work out compared to the children of this generation. Long school hours, the ordeal of getting ready for school and tuitions increase inactivity.

Help your children maintain a healthy body weight

1. Be supportive. Children know if they are overweight and don't need to be reminded or singled out. They need acceptance, encouragement and love.
2. Avoid excessive use of commercial or processed foods during the weaning stage i.e. 6-12 months.
3. Set guidelines for the amount of time your children can spend watching television or playing video games
4. Plan family activities that involve exercise. Instead of watching TV, go hiking or biking, wash the car, or walk around a mall. Offer choices and let your children decide.
5. Be sensitive. Find activities your children will enjoy that aren't difficult.
6. Eat meals together as a family and eat at the table, not in front of a television. Eat slowly and enjoy the food.
7. Don't use food as a reward or punishment.
8. Involve your children in meal planning and grocery shopping. This helps them learn and gives them a role in the decision-making.
9. Keep healthy snacks on hand. Good options include fresh fruits and vegetables; low-fat cheese, yogurt or ice cream; frozen fruit juice bars; and cookies
10. Sale of fast foods/colas etc through their canteens should be regulated by schools.
11. Focus on small, gradual changes in eating and activity patterns. This helps form habits that can last a lifetime.