



Your child's extra weight

Dr Paul Martiquet, Medical Health Officer

Consider this patient's symptoms: seriously overweight, exhibits high blood pressure and elevated cholesterol and may be diabetic or pre-diabetic. Sure sounds like a heavyset 45-year-old, doesn't it? It could also be a child in your community.

The incidence of childhood obesity in Canada has tripled over the past 20 years. A report from the Canadian Institute for Health Information calculated that obesity among 7 to 13 year-olds rose from 5% in 1981 to 17% in 1996 for boys and 15% for girls. A more recent study in Quebec showed that almost a half of 16 year-olds in that province were at risk of heart disease in later life because of lifestyle factors, such as obesity, physical inactivity, or smoking.

While we are all aware of this trend to excess weight, why it is happening is less obvious. Three main trends combine to make our kids overweight — including some we have little control over.

Our culture is a major influence. Food is both inexpensive and easily available, especially those foods that are least good for us. Leisure time has evolved into 'do nothing' time instead of recreational. And most children rarely get out of the house to play and to be active.

The trend in physical activity is a second influencer. Though improving, less phys-ed in schools means less active kids and many children consider playing to be a screen-based activity. Television and computer screens control children's attention for four or more hours a day. Children tend to get to school and activities not on foot or bicycle, but by getting a ride. Indeed, many kids live in environments where physical activity and healthy eating are not encouraged.

And the trends in food are even less helpful. Sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs) including punch, pop, 'energy' drinks, flavoured milk and coffee drinks all contribute to the problem. Convenience foods and snacks with high salt and sugar do little for nutrition, but a great deal for weight.

While weight gain does have a genetic component, for most children (and yes, adults, too) the problem is easily defined: consume more energy than you use up and your body will store the extra as fat. Simple. To avoid weight gain, either increase activity or reduce energy — the best results have been shown to come from a combination of the two.

To find out if your child is overweight or obese, consider their Body Mass Index. For those who want to, that is the number you get by dividing weight in kilos by the square of the height in metres. Even with the number in hand, it is still a good idea to consult with your child's doctor or pediatrician. He or she can best evaluate the situation based on factors like age, growth patterns and family history.

If you are worried about your child's weight, take it seriously, and take action. Look at lifestyle, habits and nutrition. Join in by being active with your child; make sure healthy snacks, foods and beverages are always available, including in their school lunches.

Good sources of information abound. Canada's Physical Activity Guide for Children and Youth is a good starting place. And to learn more about childhood obesity, try the Childhood Obesity Foundation. But most of all, take action because obese children become obese adults.

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