

**- Child—nutrition****HEALTHY HABITS TO CURB CHILD OBESITY****Prioritise nutritious meals at home and in schools, lead active lifestyle, say experts**

New Straits Times · 26 Apr 2022 · 13 · TEOH PEI YING KUALA LUMPUR news@nst.com.my

PARENTS and children's learning institutions play an important role in preventing child obesity. Malaysian Medical Association president Dr Koh Kar Chai said obesity needs to be addressed from a young age, hence, children need to be educated on healthy eating habits and the benefits of physical activities.

He said, in general, Malaysians needed to take weight management more seriously as we are dubbed the fattest nation in Southeast Asia.

He said parents had the most important role in inculcating healthy habits in their children.

"When parents become more health conscious and take steps to achieve or maintain healthy weight management, only then can we expect to see children with healthy weights.

"If they themselves have unhealthy lifestyle habits, how can we expect the issue of child obesity to be addressed?" he told the New Straits Times yesterday.

Dr Koh said schools should also play their part by ensuring only healthy, balanced meals were sold in school canteens.

"Junk food and processed food have no place in schools. School canteen cooks should also be trained on cooking healthy meals. More fresh vegetables and fruits should be a staple on the menu.

"As a guide for schoolchildren, the calories for each meal should be displayed prominently in school canteens.

"Qualified physical exercise teachers can also set fitness goals with schoolchildren having weight issues."

He said to discourage high consumption of junk food, higher taxes should be imposed on manufacturers or importers of such items and tax incentives should be given to companies that are "going healthy" with products supportive of health. Meanwhile, public health expert Datuk Dr Zainal Ariffin Omar said focus should be on both nutrition and lack of physical activities when tackling child obesity.

"Obesity and being overweight not only lead to a higher risk of Covid-19 complications, but it also gives rise to non-communicable diseases in the near future.

"We should focus on a specific group, for example, pupils below 5, primary schoolers and adolescents. We should focus on both over-nutrition and lack of physical activities aspects."

Dr Zainal said a multi-ministry approach that includes the Health, Education and Finance Ministries was needed in solving the problem.

"The government should revisit previous programmes and pilot projects between the Health and Education Ministries.

"Also, there is a need to have databases and surveillance systems for BMI (body mass index) of individuals aged 5 and above.

"Parents should be aware of their children's weight and act on it if they are overweight."

Last Tuesday, the NST quoted Malaysian Association for the Study of Obesity president Professor Dr Geeta Appanah as saying that overweight and obese children represent a ticking time bomb.

She said an obese child had a higher tendency to become an obese adolescent and adult because habits stick unless something was done.

Obesity among children leads to ailments similar to adults who have the same condition and who suffer from high blood pressure, high cholesterol or diabetes.

"We are seeing 10-year-olds with type 2 diabetes at clinics now and these children may also suffer from other issues, such as asthma or depression."

She added that obese children who contract Covid-19 were at greater risk of serious health complications, especially if they were unvaccinated.

They also have a higher mortality rate and are likely to experience longer hospital stays.