

- Obesity

HOW TO PREVENT YOUR CHILD FROM BECOMING OBESE

Talk to your youngsters about being healthy, not about their weight, a psychologist says. And be a role model by leading them in an active life-style

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A plump baby may be cooed over for having rubber-band wrists and chipmunk cheeks, but if that chubbiness persists when a child is on the move and rolls over into teen and adult life, it can bring a host of physiological and psychological problems.



An overweight child may suffer a crippling lack of self-confidence, says Naina Suri, a psychologist at Spot Children's Interdisciplinary Therapy Centre in Hong Kong. "They are likely to associate their bodies with shame and may find it difficult to fit in."

One study, she says, suggested obese children as young as two years old face discrimination.

Social withdrawal often compounds the weight problem, as the child may resort to emotional eating – making them more prone to eating disorders, she says.

A number of researchers have shown that symptoms associated with eating disorders – anorexia and bulimia nervosa – are often found in obese children and young adults.

In seclusion, they may seek solace in their screens, which means less physical activity and accelerated weight gain. This cycle spirals outwards as a habit and can continue long after the school years end, as it can become a self-perpetuating problem.

The World Health Organization says that obesity in children is a major public health challenge. It can result in a life plagued by chronic illness: heart disease, hypertension, diabetes and stroke, one problem feeding another and another.

Professor Albert Martin Li, professor of paediatrics at Chinese University and director of the Hong Kong Hub of Paediatric Excellence, puts obesity among children in Hong Kong at about 20 per cent – one in five.

That figure had been relatively constant for the decade leading up to 2020 – when the pandemic began.

Although official annual health assessments have been suspended since January 2020, a recent online survey of about 1,450 kindergarten and primary school students' parents suggests there has been a significant uptick in childhood obesity.

Too many of us, including children, were sitting around bored in lockdown – and snacking on unhealthy foods.

Aside from the usual suspects – lack of exercise, too much screen time, a diet that features too much fat – Li points to another culprit. “Inadequate sleep, as suboptimal sleep duration is a risk factor for obesity.”

Don't be seduced into thinking a child won't suffer the same physiological problems of being overweight as an adult, Li says.

An obese child can develop blood pressure abnormalities, as well as obstructive sleep apnoea, diabetes and orthopaedic problems, as there's too much load on young joints. One study even found grandparents could be partly to blame. There has been a rise in grandparental care of children – and a 3 per cent rise in childhood obesity.

Several factors could account for this: grandparents may have a lower inclination to do physical activity, so children indulge in even more screen time.

Some grandparents may feel the need to spoil their young charges as they are only briefly in their care. And on the mainland, grandparents' famine experience generates a long-term fear of hunger, and that may make them lean towards overfeeding their grandchildren.

Li says these issues are concerning, as he is all too familiar with the complications and longterm implications for obese children.

Added to the chronic health risks associated with being too heavy as a child, a recent study conducted by a team in Australia has identified a new risk for childhood obesity: dementia.

Previous studies have found that middle-aged and older adults with multiple risk factors – high blood pressure, increased waist circumference, low cardio fitness – have poorer cognitive function.

“We wondered whether children with combinations of poor fitness and higher levels of obesity may also be at risk for problems with memory and thinking in midlife,” says Dr Jamie Tait, a lecturer in exercise and sport science at the Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition at Deakin University.

“First, we know that low physical activity and obesity can lead to high blood pressure and diabetes in midlife, and these are associated with worse brain function, which can impair thinking and memory.

“Second, physical activity has been shown to create new blood vessels and nerve cells, improve blood flow to the brain and actually reduce the risk factors,” he says.

Adopting healthy behaviours in childhood may lead to a continuation of protective factors through adulthood, “which really gives the brain the best chance of functioning at its optimal levels,” Tait says.

The idea of children “adopting” healthy behaviours raises the question, how much of this is learned behaviour?

Research suggests parents can be role models that will positively affect their child’s physical activity habits, Li says.

“It’s probably important that children are encouraged by parents, siblings, schoolteachers to engage in physical activity and exercise when they can, as this may increase their motivation to be active, form habits that last over the lifespan, and provide the optimal conditions for brain health.”

If children participate in physical activity that they enjoy, “this will improve their self-confidence and well-being, shape their attitudes toward physical activity, and potentially lead to lifelong involvement”, Li adds.

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