

Obesity Action Plan

A plan for combating obesity in children

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1. Introduction

This document has been created to help parents to understand why their children are becoming overweight and obese. Its primary aim is to educate and provide information that may help to bring the problems under control.

As a parent as well as a nutritionist, I understand that it's not always so easy to keep a close watch on what your children are eating and drinking. When they are at school, they are exposed to many temptations from friends and peer pressure to be like other kids and not be different.

So with this in mind, I find the best way forward is to do what you can by teaching your kids about food and drinks and what they contain and what those ingredients are doing to their bodies.

Don't expect they will take too much heed, but you must persevere. Telling them once and expecting them to change overnight is not going to work.

Repetition is the key to getting your kids to gain an understanding of what aspects of food and drink will make them fat.

At the same time, it is important to make sure your kids don't form prejudiced opinions of other overweight kids, but instead to take on the desire to help them to lose weight by example.

2. How Do We Define Obesity?

The terms "overweight" and "obesity" denote ranges of a person's body weight that are greater than what would generally be considered as being healthy for any given height.

These terms also identify certain ranges of body weight that medical tests and research have shown to increase the probability of the risk of contracting certain weight related conditions, illnesses and health problems.

A simplistic method for gauging obesity in adults is by using the Body Mass Index (BMI) scale as a measure.

Using this scale, a person with a BMI of between 25 to 29.9 is considered to be overweight, while a person with a BMI of over 30 is considered to be obese. However, BMI is only a correlation with the amount of body fat that a person is carrying.

BMI does not accurately measure body fat.

To get a more accurate assessment of BMI, especially in people who are very active such as athletes, further tests will be necessary. This is because a person with a higher level of muscle tissue than the norm, even though their body fat level was within normal readings for their height, may be considered overweight.

In children the BMI works differently in assessing whether a child is at their correct weight for their height or not. In this case, the weight status is calculated using data incorporating age and sex as a percentile.

This is because children's body composition will vary as they age. It also varies between boys and girls at different ages.

An overweight child is defined as having a BMI between the 85th and 95th percentile with children of corresponding age and sex.

An obese child is defined as having a BMI above the 95th percentile with children of corresponding age and sex.

3. The Consequences of Childhood Obesity

There are several risks to health that accompany childhood obesity. It has been long established that childhood obesity can have harmful effects on the body in a variety of ways.

Some of these health risks are more immediate than others, so we will separate them into two areas:

Immediate Health Risks:

- High blood pressure (hypertension) and high cholesterol levels, which are risk factors for cardiovascular disease. In one study, 70% of obese children had at least one cardiovascular disease risk factor, and 39% had two or more.
- Increased risk of impaired glucose tolerance, insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes.
- Breathing problems such as asthma and sleep apnoea.
- Joint problems and musculoskeletal discomfort.
- Fatty liver disease, gallstones, and gastro-oesophageal reflux (heartburn).

Long Term Health Risks:

- Obese children are more likely to become obese adults. Adult obesity is associated with a number of serious health conditions including heart disease, diabetes and some cancers.
- If children are overweight, obesity in adulthood is likely to be more severe.

Overweight and obese children can also suffer from social and psychological problems, such as discrimination and poor self-esteem derived from playground taunting and bullying by normal weight peers. These problems can continue into adulthood if not treated early.

4. What Can We Do to Make it Right?

Obesity in young people is a sad sight to behold for any parent, because it implies a sense of failure on your behalf in not preventing your child from overeating and bringing the situation about. But don't despair, there is help at hand!

To begin with, no blame should be attached to either the child or to yourself as parent or anyone else for that matter. It is far better to take an objective look at the situation and then work out a plan for making things better.

It is also important to discover if the child is being taunted or bullied at school because of their weight and to try and remedy that situation first. This is because it can lead to low self esteem and lack of confidence which can physically manifest in the need to "*comfort eat*" thereby exacerbating the situation.

Tackling the root problem is the next step and that can take a concerted long term effort on the parent's behalf. If the [regular diet](#) of the parent is poor, the child will in most cases also have a poor diet.

You must lead by example and improve your diet to include a lot of fresh fruit and vegetables, fish and lean meat and to eliminate the ready meals, takeaway and other junk food that may be an integral part of the family diet.

This may not be as easy to do as it sounds, but you have to try and try very hard for your child's sake.

Processed meals have become such a large part of many families' diets that they are not seen as a problem by many people. But these kinds of meal are exactly the problem along with the propensity to [drink soda](#) and other flavoured drinks that are high in sugar.

The reliance on bread and pasta must also be relinquished along with cakes, cookies and other biscuits, savoury snacks such as crisps (potato chips), nachos and other starchy snacks, pastries and sweet confection as well as chocolate, candy and other sweet snacks.

That may seem like a tall order and it is!

The next stage is in informing your child as to why you are changing the diet and why certain foods and drinks should be avoided. This is also difficult because children don't necessarily have the same appreciation for the value of healthy foods as adults do.

The best way is to break things down into food sections and explain why each type of food is potentially dangerous to health and likely to cause weight gain.

They fall into two main categories for our purposes, which are high glycemic (*Glycemic Index, or GI*) carbohydrates and foods containing refined sugar.

High GI Carbohydrates

These are generally foods that cause their sugars to be released quickly into the blood stream. This action causes a reaction from the body in the form of a rush of insulin, which is the hormone designed to carry excess glucose from the blood stream and process it in the liver into storable fat.

Again, for the purposes of this document we will not list all the high GI carbohydrates that can raise potential dangers, but only those that are popularly ingested. These are generally foods made from refined white flour (wheat flour) that has been bleached and processed so that all the wheat germ and nutritional elements has been removed.

Products that are made with refined white flour include white bread and rolls, pasta, cakes, cookies, biscuits, pastries, pies, processed "*ready*" *meals*, pizza base. All these products are generally bought in supermarkets and form weekly shopping staples for most families.

While it would be very difficult to omit all these products from the weekly shopping cart, the amount of these items bought can be reduced gradually over time and replaced with healthier options.

Healthier options include whole grain based foods such as brown (wholemeal, whole wheat) bread, brown pasta and oat flour based products. However, the consumption of all grain-based carbohydrates should be kept to a minimum.

Refined Sugar Based Foods

These are foods that contain high levels of refined sugar (sucrose/fructose) and other sweeteners such as *high fructose corn syrup* or starch (HFCS). Mostly found in processed meals and sweetened drinks such as soda (fizzy drinks), sports drinks, juice drinks and cordials.

Fructose is processed in the liver into visceral fat, which is distributed around the body covering major organs including the heart and inside the liver itself.

This fat is not only the prime cause of obesity, but is also the most dangerous type as cells containing visceral fat are known to secrete hormones that promote abnormal growth in healthy cells as well as the formation of cancerous tumours, most notably colon and breast cancer in adults.

Giving up drinking sweetened drinks is one of the most potent ways of combating obesity because not only does it restrict the body's intake of so much refined sugar, but it also reduces the daily calorie intake by around 100 to 140 calories per can.

Just by *not* drinking one can of a popular cola drink per day can save almost 1,000 empty calories per week!

Note: It is *not* recommended to switch from normal fizzy drinks to the low calorie or "diet" variety, as while these do not contain the high levels of refined sugars, they do contain artificial sweeteners such as Aspartame.

This particular popular sweetener has been linked with cancer. It is also known to stimulate hunger, thereby causing people to reach for more of the high calorie snacks to accompany the drinks.

5. Conclusions

The way in which we inform our kids of the right way to eat is important in getting them to take that information on board. Trying to force the information on them won't work as they will simply resist. It's far better to lead by example and show them what you like to eat that is healthy and less likely to cause weight gain.

When introducing the information they need to make informed decisions of their own, do it gradually and add to it over time. It's easier to assimilate information when it's done in small chunks rather than all in one go.

Getting kids to learn things that are for their benefit is an art form in itself. Get it wrong and they will simply ignore the advice and do what they want. It is far better to get them on your side than to turn them against you!

Please note: This is the abridged version of this document. The full booklet will shortly be available for Kindle at a modest price.

References:

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