

Obese children may get chronic diseases earlier

Childhood obesity can lead to serious health issues like diabetes and fatty liver, and should be managed as soon as possible, says dietitian Sarah Sinaram

With fewer opportunities to be active during the pandemic, many put on extra kilos in Singapore, children included.

In a written reply by the Ministry of Health for the sitting of Parliament, it was noted that the proportion of obese children in mainstream schools, aged six to 18, rose from 13 per cent in 2017 to 16 per cent in 2021, with the increase largely seen in the last two years.

With obesity being a public health concern worldwide and a major risk factor for poor health and even early death, it's vital for childhood obesity to be managed as early as possible. Ms Sarah Sinaram, manager of the dietetics department at Mount Alvernia Hospital, explains why.

Q My child's paediatrician has diagnosed my nine-year-old son as obese and recommends he lose weight immediately. However, my son is tall and does not look big. When is a child considered obese?

Children normally carry different amounts of body fat at various stages of development so you might not be able to tell from his appearance.

Obesity in children aged six to 18 can be determined by Body Mass Index (BMI)-for-age percentiles. If your son's BMI-for-age percentile is more than the 97th percentile, he is considered obese or severely overweight.

Q Why is obesity in children a serious problem? What causes it?

If obese children do not manage their weight, they are at greater risk of chronic illnesses and health conditions at an earlier age. These medical issues include Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol, fatty liver, obstructive sleep apnoea, irregular periods, and knee and ankle problems.



Creating a conducive environment that encourages healthy eating and increased physical activity helps manage childhood obesity. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Childhood obesity can persist into adulthood and increases the risk of heart disease, stroke and some types of cancer such as colon and breast cancer.

Obese children may also experience low self-esteem, eating or mood disorders, bullying and depression.

Likely causes of childhood obesity include:

- Increased sedentary activities
- Reduced physical activity and exercise
- Increased calorie intake through food
- Family influence, such as parents who do not exercise or have poor eating habits.

Q How can parents manage obesity in their children?

As parents, you serve as a role model and motivator to your child. Serve child-sized portions of healthy, balanced meals at home and limit high-calorie snacks.

Avoid using food as a form of reward as your child may unknowingly develop an unhealthy emotional relationship with food. If sugary treats or salty snacks are used as a reward, this may lead to a poor diet with nutritional inadequacies. Instead, be positive and patient with them when trying to change habits.

You can also encourage regular physical activity as a family. Simple and fun activities include swimming, rope jumping and frisbee. Take the stairs together instead of the lift, and use public transport instead of the family car.



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