

Childhood Obesity

Childhood Obesity on the Rise

Obesity in children is becoming a major concern. Worldwide, the number of children who are obese has doubled in the last two to three decades; currently about 30% of children are obese. In the UAE, this number stands at 26% which is just below the international average. The increase is in all age, race and gender groups.

There are a number of causes of obesity. Genetics can play a role. This is found to be the case for a number of Emirati children whose families have a history of obesity. However, the main problems are simply too little activity and too much of the wrong kinds of food.

With the development of satellite television, it is now possible to watch television 24 hours a day in many countries of the world. There are many channels which show only children's programmes, so the number of hours children spend watching it has increased. Today, almost half of children aged 8-16 years watch five hours of television a day. Children who watch the most hours of television have the highest incidence of obesity, due to inactivity. Instead of going outside to do something, many children now prefer to stay at home. In addition, in the past, schools offered many opportunities for children to play sports. Nowadays, schools offer less time for physical activity programs in order to focus more on academic work.

Food habits have also changed over the past ten years. The diet of many children is now dominated by fast food and junk food. Everywhere children go, they are offered unhealthy food.

Parents, educators and health officials should be working towards the same goal: reducing obesity and the resulting health and emotional problems. They can do this in a number of ways.

Parents can help their children maintain a healthy body weight by encouraging them to be more physically active. They should limit the time their children spend on TV and video games and push them to do exercise. The children can participate in organized sports or personal fitness activities, or they can simply play with their friends. Schools can help by re-introducing sports activities into the timetable.

Children should never be put on diets unless a doctor prescribes one for medical reasons. Instead, parents should guide their children's food choices by keeping healthy snacks. They should try to eliminate the habit of eating fast food and instead always serve healthy, low fat foods at meals. Very importantly, they should focus on making small, gradual changes in their children's eating and activity patterns.

Children often carry habits that they learn when they are young through their lives. If they learn how important exercise and diet are to their health, and practice what they learn, they may live longer and healthier lives.

Obesity Defined

Obesity and overweight are defined as an accumulation of excess body fat, to an extent that may impair health. A basic measure of excess fat is the body mass index (BMI), a person's weight (in kilograms) divided by the square of his or her height (in metres). WHO defines overweight as a BMI of 25 or more, and obesity as a BMI of 30 or more. These cut-off points can provide a reference for individual assessment.

There is also evidence that, on a population level, the risk of chronic disease increases progressively as average BMI increases above 21. A high body mass index is a major risk factor for a number of chronic diseases, including cardiovascular diseases, cancer and diabetes.

World Health Organisation (2015) <http://www.who.int/topics/obesity/en/>

Body Mass Index (BMI)

Body mass index is a simple and widely used method to estimate body fat. It is calculated by dividing a person's weight by the square of his/her height. The current definitions commonly used to establish a person's weight classification are as follows:

- A BMI less than 18.5 is *underweight*
- A BMI of 18.5-24.9 is *normal weight*
- A BMI of 25-29.9 is *overweight*
- A BMI of over 30 is *obese*

UK National Health Service (2012) <http://www.nhs.gov.uk>

Obesity in the Developed World

In more affluent parts of the world such as Europe, North America and the Arabian Gulf, childhood obesity is becoming a major health concern. The rate of obesity is increasing dramatically and now stands at 25% or higher in many countries.

These obese children are at risk for many serious health conditions like high blood pressure and high cholesterol which can lead to later heart disease. They also have shown an increase in type 2 diabetes. All of these health problems were once considered adult-only diseases but are now becoming common among overweight children. Obese children also have a high incidence of bone problems and liver disease.

Children who are obese experience difficulty breathing which makes exercise, sports, or any physical activity more difficult. This can worsen the symptoms or increase the chances of developing asthma (a chronic breathing disorder). One of the most severe problems for overweight children is sleep apnea (interrupted breathing while sleeping). In some cases, this can lead to problems with learning and memory.

Obese children often have low self-esteem: they feel very bad about themselves. Many of them also suffer from severe shyness, depression, anger or feelings of stress. This can be because overweight children are often ignored as playmates by other children and even suffer physical abuse from them. They may be teased or bullied by other children. Consequently, these children who are unhappy with their weight sometimes develop unhealthy dieting habits or eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia.

To help reduce obesity, or to avoid it altogether, it is best to start good exercise and eating habits while children are still

young. Encourage them to play and be active while limiting the time they spend watching television, using the computer or playing video games. Teach them about healthy eating and offer them a wide choice of nutritious foods, both as snacks and at meal time. Keep junk foods out of the house, especially those which are high in fats or sugars such as potato chips. One of the biggest problem foods for children is fizzy drinks. Stop giving children these kinds of drinks and replace them with healthier drinks such as unsweetened fresh fruit juices.

Get children into good habits about eating healthy foods and being active. The key to keeping children at a healthy weight is for parents to teach them about exercise and diet by their own good example.

Overweight and Obesity. Retrieved May 10, 2015, from www.kidshealth.org

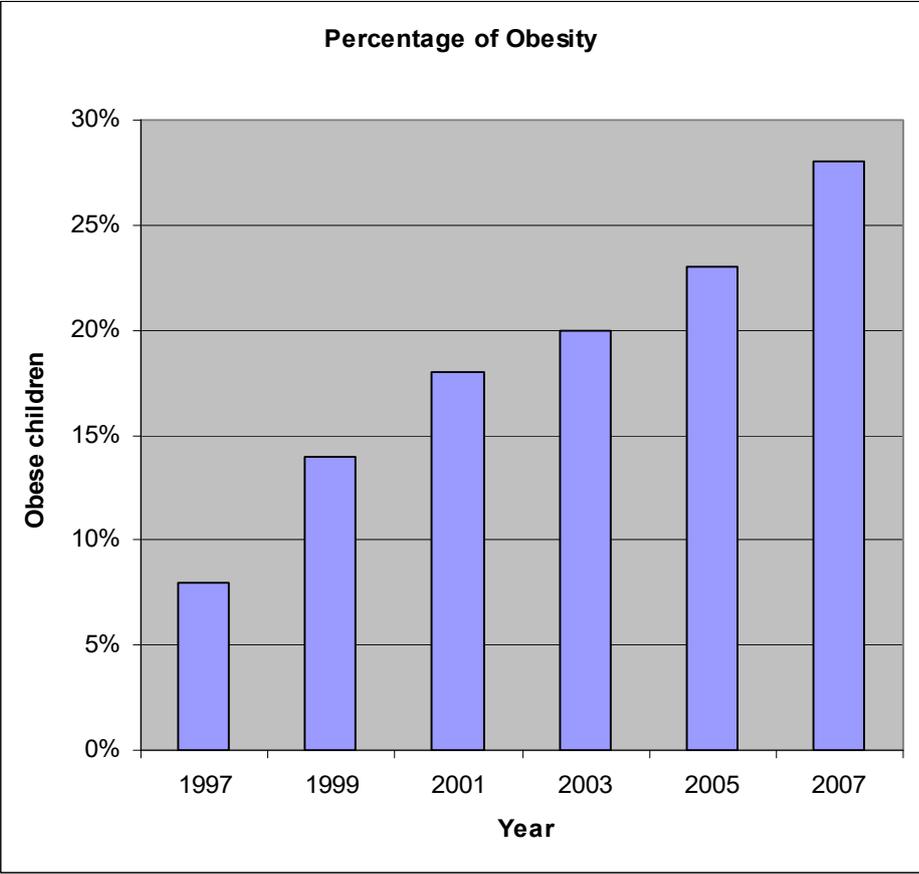
Facts about overweight and obesity

The World Health Organization's (WHO) latest statistics show that in 2005 at least 300 million children (aged 5 - 15) worldwide were obese and they predict that by 2015, approximately 400 million will be obese. Globally, at least 20 million children under the age of 5 years were obese in 2005.

Obesity was once considered a problem only in high-income countries, but it is now dramatically rising in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in towns and cities.

World Health Organisation (2007) Retrieved, November 8, 2015, <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs311/en/index.html>

The worldwide rise in the rate of obesity among children aged 5–15 (1997–2007)



Martin Baker (2007) Prevalence of overweight and obesity among children worldwide. *Obesity reviews*. 8: 15-20.