

UNIT NO. 3

PREVENTING AND MANAGING OBESITY AMONG THE YOUNG – LEVERAGING ON A MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Obesity is associated with many serious health consequences. Obesity prevention and control is therefore of paramount importance. Healthy diet and regular physical activity are key tenets of healthy living and they contribute towards the achievement of energy balance and the prevention of obesity. This paper outlines the multi-pronged approach adopted by the Health Promotion Board (HPB) in combating obesity among the young. The strategies are: building the capacities of children and youth; empowering stakeholders; establishing sustainable collaborations; creating conducive health promoting environments; leveraging on evidence-based Practice; and preventive health services.

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INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), overweight and obesity are defined as the abnormal or excessive accumulation of fat which may impair health. Globally, in 2005, WHO projected that there were approximately 1.6 billion overweight adults (aged 15+) and at least 400 million obese adults. Among the young, there were at least 20 million children under the age of 5 who were overweight. WHO further projects that by 2015, approximately 2.3 billion adults will be overweight and more than 700 million will be obese.

In Singapore, overweight and obesity among adults continue to trend upwards. According to local National Health Surveys, the prevalence of obesity among adults aged between 18 and 69 years of age has increased steadily from 1992 to 2004 (Table 1).

As for the young, the proportion of overweight students fell from 11.7% of all students in 1993 to 9.5% in 2006.

Overweight and obesity can result in serious health consequences such as cardiovascular disease, stroke, hypertension, diabetes and certain cancers. Some of these health consequences also manifest in severely overweight children. Furthermore, childhood obesity increases the risk of adult obesity and exerts significant socio-emotional impact on them. Indeed, obesity is associated with significant health, economic and social costs associated and has become a public health concern which warrants attention.

An energy imbalance between calories consumed and that expended is the fundamental aetiology of overweight and obesity. Healthy eating and regular physical activity are therefore key tenets in the prevention of obesity.

Many lifestyle habits including health-related ones such as healthy eating and regular physical activity are best inculcated and moulded from a young age. Such positive lifestyles are also more likely to be sustained in later life. To this end, the Health Promotion Board (HPB) adopts a multi-pronged approach and leverages on various strategies to promote healthy eating and an active lifestyle to combat obesity among the young. These strategies include:

- a. Building the capacities of children and youth. Children and youth need to be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to make informed choices with regards to healthy eating and an active lifestyle.

This is done through a variety of media including face-to-face programmes conducted in the pre-schools, primary and secondary schools as well as Institutes of Higher Learning. Such programmes include school health fairs, exhibitions and competitions which seek to raise their awareness of the benefits of healthy eating, regular physical activity and also equip them with skills to make healthier choices. For example, the young learn about the Healthy Diet Pyramid and the Healthier Choice Symbol which they can use to help them select healthier food choices.

Recognising that the youth are a challenging target group to engage in health promotion, innovative and youth-centric communication touch points are leveraged upon to disseminate the health education messages. A variety of channels including the Internet, blogs and other appropriate activities are used to bring nutrition education messages in refreshing ways to the young.

- b. Empowering stakeholders. Stakeholders including teachers and parents play a pivotal role in nurturing the health and wellbeing of the young. They can help to shape positive lifestyle behaviours in their children and also serve as positive role models for them to emulate.

Capacity building programmes such as workshops and culinary training sessions are organised to equip them with the skills and empower them to nurture healthy eating and an active lifestyle in their children.

Table 1. Prevalence of overweight and obesity among adults (1992 – 2004)

	BMI	1992	1998	2004
Obesity	BMI ≥ 30	5.1%	6.0%	6.9%
Overweight	BMI 25.0 – 29.9	21.1%	24.4%	25.6%

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- c. Establishing sustainable collaborations. HPB also engages multiple stakeholders who play a role in the growth and development of our young. It works closely with the Ministry of Education (MOE) to include key messages related to healthy weight, diet and physical activity into the formal Health Education, Science, Home Economics and Physical Activity curricula in schools. Through the formal curriculum, the young are educated about these aspects of healthy living.

HPB also works with other non-health sector partners such as the Singapore Sports Council and People's Association to promote healthy living among the young.

- d. Creating conducive health promoting environments. HPB works closely with schools to implement the Model School Tuckshop Programme (MSTP). Developed jointly with the Ministry of education in 2003, the MSTP provides schools with a set of food service guidelines which seek to ensure that



**Model School
Tuckshop**

students have access to healthier food and beverage choices in school.

Schools which participate in this initiative will be assessed for their adherence with the guidelines and those which do so will be awarded the Model School Tuckshop status.

In addition, school tuckshop vendors from participating schools also attend culinary training programmes which aim to equip them with the knowledge and skills to prepare healthier meals. To date, about 87% of schools have achieved the Model School Tuckshop status.

A similar programme known as the Healthy Eating in Child Care Centres Programme (HECCP) is also organised for the child care centres where a significant proportion of young children spend a good part of their day in. The HECCP provides child care centres with a set of food service guidelines to ensure that the children enjoy healthy meals while they are there.

- e. Leveraging on evidence-based practice. In 2007, HPB developed and introduced a set of dietary guidelines for children and adolescents aged 0 – 18 years.

The guidelines aim to provide relevant, practical and scientifically based information on how to promote and maintain the health and wellbeing of the young through healthy eating.

In conjunction with the release of these guidelines, a new recommendation for physical activity was also introduced for the young. This recommendation encourages youth to engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate intensity physical activities on at least 5 days a week.

- f. Implementing preventive health services. HPB works closely with schools to support the severely overweight students in their endeavours to achieve healthy weight.

Schools refer these students to the Student Health Centre in HPB where they will be assessed for medical co-morbidities associated with their weight status. These students will also be referred to the Nutrition Clinic where they will be attend a structured 3-4 session programme which engage them in a series of experiential hands-on activities to equip them with the knowledge and skills to make healthy dietary choices and lead an active lifestyle.

Parents are also engaged in these sessions to ensure that they can support and encourage their children in their lifestyle modifications at home.



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, obesity is a public health issue which warrants a multi-pronged approach to prevent and control. Such an approach will leverage on the concerted and co-ordinated efforts across various sectors and stakeholders to ensure that our young achieve healthy weight and reap the benefits of healthy eating and an active lifestyle.

LEARNING POINTS

- **A variety of channels including the Internet, blogs and other appropriate activities are used to bring nutrition education messages in refreshing ways to the young.**
- **Stakeholders including teachers and parents can help to shape positive lifestyle behaviours in their children and also serve as positive role models for them to emulate.**
- **A programme known as the Healthy Eating in Child Care Centres Programme (HECCP) is organised for the child care centres providing a set of food service guidelines to ensure that the children enjoy healthy meals while they are there.**
- **A new recommendation for physical activity, introduced for the young, encourages youth to engage in at least 60 minutes of moderate intensity physical activities on at least 5 days a week.**