



OBESITY IN CHILDREN

In Ireland it is currently estimated that 300,000 children are either overweight or obese and worryingly our obesity rates don't appear to be slowing down. Constant media coverage and government initiatives like the obesity task force have resulted in ever increasing public awareness of this problem but the issue does not appear to be resolving...so what can we do?

Firstly we need to understand what obesity is and the health implications of it. People should be aware that many of the health risks associated with being overweight or obese are not actually visible; e.g. too much fat in the blood and diabetes. Secondly, we need to make parents more aware of their own Child's weight and what exactly an overweight child looks like; one alarming statistic showed that 1/3 of parents of obese teenagers think their teenager's weight is "fine"; and 3/4 of parents of overweight teenagers think their teenager's weight is fine.¹

Children who are obese between six months and five years of age have a 25% chance of becoming obese adults. If they are obese when they are over six this increases to 50% and obese adolescents are 80% more likely to become obese adults. Obesity accounts for 5% of heart attacks and stroke, 10% of osteoarthritis, 20% of hypertension, 30% of cancers and 80% of type 2 diabetes.³ These figures are the type of statistics that we need to be made aware of.

Focusing on balanced nutrition is key for any family. Making the focus about healthier eating habits instead of just about weight loss makes it easier for the family as a whole to put changes into action. Often diets that are high in sugar, salt and fatty foods are low in essential vitamins and minerals and the intake of these types of foods displaces good nutritious foods. The National Children's Food Survey highlighted that Irish kids are getting the balance wrong. Many of our Irish kids aged between 5 and 12 years have inadequate intakes of calcium, iron, folate and vitamins A and D. On the other hand, an estimated 25.5% of their calorie intake is supplied by biscuits, cakes, confectionary, sugars, fats and desserts everyday.⁴

An estimated 42% of teenage girls do not meet their calcium requirements and 4/5 Irish teens are not meeting the recommended fibre intakes.⁵ Such deficiencies as these can be easily rectified by improved dietary choices at home. Looking at fibre...we know 4/5 Irish teens have an inadequate fibre intake.⁵ Fibre rich foods provide the essential dietary fibre that we need for better bowel health but also high fibre foods tend to be low glycaemic index (GI) foods which means they provide a slow release of energy. Basing a diet around low GI high fibre foods can help promote nutritional balance whilst promoting satiety and therefore encouraging less snacking.

We know that 74% of teenage girls and 19% of boys were not getting enough Iron in their diets.⁵ Iron deficiency can impair mood, concentration and physical performance, and lead to fatigue. When people are tired or stressed they tend to make poor food choices so deficiencies like this in the diet can have an impact on food choices throughout

the day. Frequently when people feel like they are lacking energy they opt for sugary drinks or snacks to give them a boost. Ensuring an adequate dietary intake of iron could help improve a child's overall energy levels while boosting the immune system.

Focusing on balanced nutrition without focusing too much on counting calories can be effective weight loss solution for families. Offering simple guidelines like those listed below can help families start making positive changes without feeling they have to change their entire lifestyles;

1. Ensuring colour at every meal in the form of some fruit or vegetables. A simple guideline like this is easy to comprehend but can help ensure families are getting their 5 or more servings from this food group daily.
2. Daily activity, keeping a family chart in the kitchen where everyone writes up much activity they have completed that day including parents. We should all be aiming for at least 30 minutes of activity per day but kids should be aiming for 60 minutes per day. ¹
3. Going for brown. Cut out white breads and refined cereals and start choosing high fibre options for the whole family. This will increase fibre in the diet and promote the intake of slow release energy foods at mealtimes.
4. Keeping hydrated; encourage water as a drink and ensure that everybody is drinking the recommended 6-8 cups per day. We often mistake thirst for hunger and not drinking enough fluid in the day can effect concentration too. Encourage 1 glass of juice per day, water and 1-2 glasses of low fat milk.
5. Cutting back on TV. One of the easier ways to encourage less viewing times in families is no TV during mealtimes and only eating meals in one room in the house e.g. the kitchen or at the dining table.

Ultimately managing weight loss should not be difficult, the basic rules still apply; increasing fibre rich foods, increasing fruits and vegetables, lowering fat and salt intake and increasing physical activity. But still weight management is currently posing one of the biggest public health challenges in Ireland. Acknowledging a weight problem understanding its health consequences are essential first steps in tackling obesity, encouraging healthy eating and activity at home at the next steps.

REFERENCES

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