



Tackling Childhood Obesity



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Despite the abundance of opportunities to engage in a healthy lifestyle, our national health statistics reveal alarmingly that adults are experiencing critical levels of overweight and obesity (63% total), as are just over a quarter (27%) of our children, with 20% overweight, and 7% obese. These statistics go hand in hand with statistics of fruit and vegetable consumption showing only 4% of children aged 2-18 years consume their recommended daily intake of vegetables, and only a third of children eat the recommended two serves of fruit daily. It is crucial to promote healthy eating, through a number of channels, in the early years.

Childhood obesity directly relates to adult obesity prevalence, impaired cognitive, physical (growth and motor skills) and social development, correlating to poor education, health and economic outcomes in adulthood. Furthermore, poor health and economic outcomes are directly associated with reduced quality of life, reduced productivity, and, to society the cost of providing health services. These adverse outcomes may also have an inter-generational component that is evidenced by repeating patterns of poor health and economic outcomes experienced by future generations of families within the same communities. By improving nutrition across the life cycle, the potential exists for a healthier more productive population with less reliance on health services.

A life-course approach acknowledges the importance of time and cumulative experiences in an individual's life in the context of overall health and chronic disease risk. By focusing on improving the eating habits of young children, a healthy start in life will contribute to lifelong health outcomes and the alleviation of the burden of disease by both promoting optimal growth and development, and potentially reducing the prevalence of obesity, along with other chronic diseases. A unique window of opportunity presents itself in the early years of life when it may be possible to influence children to develop health-promoting behaviours related to food choice that may be beneficial throughout the course of life. In combination with healthy dietary behaviours and other lifestyle factors, the potential therefore exists to maintain functional capacity throughout adulthood and to prevent disability and maintain independence in older life.

As there are inherent biological, behavioural and psychosocial processes occurring during different life stages, there are opportunities at sensitive, developmental times to alter the trajectory of health and lifestyle outcomes for individuals and

possibly future generations. These opportunities present themselves through health promotion and include harnessing the skills and expertise of community health providers, educators and primary health providers. Findings of a recent systematic review suggest the complex and multi-factorial nature of childhood obesity necessitates programs with multiple approaches, and greater success was found where programs included both school and community settings. Through daily activities, nurses have regular interactions and sustained relationships with patients and members of the community with opportunities for health-related discussions.

In Australia, we are fortunate to have access to fresh and wholesome produce, with a climate and social environment supporting a lifestyle embracing health, vigour and the great outdoors. By instilling healthy eating behaviours early, the cumulative effect of a life-course approach provides a foundation for optimal health and also supports public health messages a person will be exposed to, strengthening the impact and improving outcomes at an individual and population level.

Whilst health and lifestyle outcomes related to over-nutrition in populations in recent times have prompted numerous public health interventions, more can be done to help our families at the community level. Childhood obesity is not an anticipated outcome for normal healthy growth and development, and the goals of interventions designed to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity are closely related to the aims of public health initiatives promoting healthy growth and development in childhood. By promoting simple, effective nutrition messages regularly, children and families are supported and public health messages are effectively reinforced. For tailored advice to suit individuals and families, see your local Accredited Practising Dietitian <https://daa.asn.au/find-an-apd/>. ■

With vegetable intake so low, it's a great place to start with healthy eating. Some tips to increase family vegetable intake include:

- Cut up raw vegetables for snacks, and keep in airtight containers for up to 3 days,
- Serve raw vegetables with a healthy dip such as hummus for afternoon snacks,
- Grate vegetables eg carrot and zucchini into slow cooked meals such as spaghetti bolognese,
- Add lentils and beans to slow-cooked recipes to extend the protein in meals,
- Swap packet food for mini salad vegetables in your child's lunchbox eg cherry tomatoes, mini cucumbers,
- Provide a variety of colourful vegetables at mealtimes to avoid over-exposure eg salads, steamed or baked vegetables,
- Buy vegetables in season and keep frozen vegetables for budget, convenience and quick meals,
- Involve children in family meal planning and food preparation,
- Provide resources from credible sources:
 - Dietitians Association of Australia: <https://daa.asn.au/smart-eating-for-you/>,
 - Australian Dietary Guidelines: https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/file/your_health/healthy/nutrition/n55a_australian_dietary_guidelines_summary_131014_1.pdf,
 - Nutrition Australia Queensland <http://www.nutritionaustralia.org/>,
 - Heart Foundation <https://www.heartfoundation.org.au/healthy-eating>.

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