



A recent Health Promotion Board study found that 70 per cent of children who were overweight at age seven stayed chubby as adults. It also revealed that 10 per cent of five-year-olds are overweight. One of the main health issues associated with excess weight is the risk of getting diabetes. PHOTO: ISTOCK

## PARENTING MATTERS

# Protect your child against diabetes

*Experts recommend these lifestyle changes to reduce kids' chances of getting the disease*

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**SINGAPORE** – In 2010, a national health survey concluded that almost one-third of Singaporeans face a high risk of getting diabetes in their lifetime. Then, in 2014, a research paper by a group of National University of Singapore academics revealed that by 2050, Singaporeans will potentially have a one-in-two chance of developing Type 2 diabetes.

The thing is, it is not just adults who need to be worried: Rising obesity in children means that youngsters should also be aware of their chances of getting this chronic disease.

Dr Christelle Tan, a specialist in paediatrics at Raffles Specialists, Raffles Holland V, revealed how national health statistics in 2010 revealed that the number of overweight or severely overweight primary school students stood at 12 per cent, and that of secondary school students was 10.5 per cent.

Additionally, a recent Health Promotion Board study on obesity found that 70 per cent of children who were overweight at age seven stayed chubby as adults. It also revealed

that 10 per cent of five-year-olds are overweight.

Carrying excess weight comes with a whole set of health problems, with one of the most significant being the risk of getting diabetes.

"Type 1 diabetes used to be known as childhood diabetes as many patients are diagnosed from a young age," said Dr Tan. "The incidence, however, remains stably low in our population (2.46 per 100,000 for children one to 12 years). Type 2 diabetes used to be more common in adulthood, but is increasingly being diagnosed in children due to the increased incidence of obesity."

Dr Tan added that while Type 1 diabetes is generally associated with a genetic predisposition, Type 2 diabetes tends to be linked to more modifiable lifestyle factors such as obesity, living a sedentary existence and having unhealthy eating habits.

Ethnicity also seems to play a role in Type 2 diabetes: In Singapore, studies show that the Indian and Malay ethnic groups tend to be more at risk.

While the disease can be managed, diabetes could affect a child's life beyond just taking medication and eating the "right" foods.

## NOT JUST ABOUT SUGAR

"Having diabetes disrupts children's lives and imposes on them lifestyle

changes they are usually not mentally prepared to make or emotionally ready to accept," explained associate professor Fabian Yap, head and senior consultant, endocrinology service, department of paediatrics at KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH).

"A diagnosis of Type 2 diabetes at a young age is also at odds with the aura of 'bodily invincibility' children feel they have a right to have," he added. "Many children feel simply confused and conflicted, leading to poor glucose control. Those with poorer blood glucose control are at greater risk of developing complications."

Prof Yap also shared that since 1997, when the hospital introduced its paediatric specialties, it has treated more than 1,000 children with diabetes, the majority of whom were diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes.

But KKH statistics "do not reflect any increase in the number of children newly diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes in recent years".

To avoid health issues such as obesity and diabetes, experts say parents should learn how to manage their kids' diet and lifestyle. And this goes beyond just cutting out sugar.

"Too much sugar does not mean your child will get diabetes — it's a more indirect relationship," explained Jaclyn Reutens, dietician at Aptima Nutrition & Sports Consultants.

"Excess sugar intake increases the

risk of accumulating excess fat, which will increase the risk of diabetes. This theory is similar for adults too."

Ms Reutens pointed out the difference between white sugar (sucrose) that we add to cakes and desserts, compared with other types of sugar — lactose found in dairy, and fructose found in fruit.

"Lactose and fructose are not considered bad because they are found in foods that are highly nutritious and should be incorporated in your child's daily diet," she said. "Sucrose, on the other hand, provides energy with little nutritional value."

She added that while children need loads of vigour to sustain their high-energy expenditure, the foods they eat regularly "should also contain other vitamins, minerals, dietary fibre, protein and good fats".

## ADOPTING A HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

To avoid obesity in kids, Ms Reutens suggested parents include wholegrain foods as often as possible, as these help to control appetite and blood sugar levels.

Parents should also limit sweetened beverages such as cordials, canned drinks and fruit juices, and encourage their children to make water their beverage of choice instead.

And while children should be allowed to enjoy sweets and cakes, they need to know these are not everyday foods. Do not look at them as "reward foods" either, as that will send the wrong message to the kids.

Foods that contain high amounts of fat, especially saturated fat — such as pastries, ice-cream and deep-fried foods — should be limited to no more than twice a week.

Parents should also offer their kids healthier snacks such as wholemeal biscuits, fruit, yogurt, milk, nuts, low-sugar cereals and vegetable sticks. "A healthy diet should not have any food restrictions, rather, a good sense of portion control," Ms Reutens advised.

In addition to following a sensible food plan, parents should also encourage physical activity and exercise, urged Dr Tan. For example, children aged seven to 18 should undergo at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous-intensity physical activity, at least three times a week.

"Cut down on sedentary activities such as watching TV or using the iPad. Screen time should be limited to not more than two hours in a day or 14 hours in a week," she added.

Promoting a healthier lifestyle should be at the core of what parents should do, in order to stave off obesity and diabetes, said associate professor Yap.

"Given that obesity and diabetes are related to genetic predisposition, behavioural patterns and environmental factors, it follows that Type 2 diabetes can be prevented by following a healthy lifestyle, adopting measures such as careful and responsible meal plans and physical activity," he said.