

Overweight and obesity in young people: Role of gender, diet and active life style

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Introduction

Overweight and obesity in children below the age of 12 years and young individuals is a global public health issue. Obese children are more likely to stay obese in their adult years and are at higher risk of developing non-communicable diseases and disabilities.

Aim

To assess the prevalence and associated factors of overweight and obesity in young individuals in Southern Sri Lanka.

Methods

A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 2073 individuals in Southern Sri Lanka, using a self-administered questionnaire. Overweight and obesity related factors were analyzed in a subsample of 401 young individuals aged between 15-24 years. Overweight and obesity were defined using Sri Lankan standards. Those who had BMI (kg/h²) between 22.9 –27.5 and above 27.5 were defined as overweight and obese respectively. Diet was assessed using questions on the consumption of vegetables, fruits, fast food and sugary drinks during a week. Physical activity was assessed using the number of days a week involved in moderate and rigorous exercise.

Results

Among the participants 51.6% were females, and mean age was 20.6 (*SD*±2.2) years. Among females, prevalence of underweight, overweight and obesity was 37.7%, 14.0% and 5.8% respectively. The corresponding figures for males were 39.2%, 13.4% and 2.1% respectively. The prevalence of obesity was higher in females compared to males (*p*=0.05). Age and sex matched normal (*n*=71) and overweight /obese (*n*=71) subjects were compared and in both females and males, prevalence of physically active life style was higher in normal subjects compared to overweight/obese, but a significant difference was found only in males (*p*<0.01). No significant associations were found between overweight/obesity and consumption of fast foods, sugary drinks, vegetables and fruits.

Discussion and Conclusion

Young females were more likely than young males to become obese. Lack of physical activity was associated with overweight and obesity though dietary pattern does not seem to have any significant effect. Thus, it is not diet, but the active life style that should be given priority in promoting healthy weight among young people.