

Parents of fat kids don't see problem: doctors

Study finds adults a key barrier to fighting obesity

BY SHARON KIRKEY, POSTMEDIA NEWS

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Canada's pediatricians say it isn't just a lack of dietitians and resources that keeps them from helping overweight kids. It's also the parents who don't see a problem.

More than 60 per cent of 860 pediatricians and family doctors surveyed in a newly published study identified parents who are overweight themselves, parents who become defensive when the topic of their child's weight is raised and parents who show little interest in helping their child lose weight as key barriers to curbing the growing numbers of children who are growing up fat.

Doctors also said they lack the professional training, resources and time needed to deal with the problem of childhood obesity.

The survey, the first of its kind in Canada, was conducted in 2005-06. Doctors say the same issues exist today, only magnified by ever-rising rates in overweight children.

"We haven't documented until this paper how ill-prepared we are in terms of resources and parental attitudes," says Dr. David Lau, president of Obesity Canada and a professor of medicine at the University of Calgary, who was not involved in the research. "This is a phenomenon that is happening all across the country."

According to Statistics Canada, 17 per cent of children in Canada are overweight; nine per cent are obese. The proportion of teenage boys classified as overweight or obese has more than doubled since 1981, climbing from 14 per cent, to 31 per cent in 2009. Among teenage girls, it increased from 14 per cent to 25 per cent.

Among both teenage boys and girls, the proportion whose waist size puts them at high or increased risk of health problems has more than tripled.

Overweight children are at increased risk for a litany of health problems, including diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, abnormal blood clotting, hardening of the arteries, sleep apnea, asthma and "non-alcoholic" fatty liver disease.

Yet, "a number of parents are not aware of their child's weight problems," says Meizi He, lead author of the study, published in the current issue of *Paediatrics & Child Health*, the official journal of the Canadian Paediatric Society.

"Parents do have to take responsibility to raise healthy kids, but they're vulnerable to an environment filled with junk food commercials and video games," said He, an associate professor at the University of Texas in San Antonio. "In one sense, overweight children and their families are victims of this societal change."

Parents often think their child will outgrow the weight, she said. While it's not a predetermined fate, studies show that overweight children and teenagers are likely to grow into overweight adults.

"We need to educate parents ... that this is an issue that must be attended to," said He, who was an associate professor at Brescia University College in London, Ont., when the research was conducted.

Part of the problem is that so many parents themselves are now overweight it has skewed the perception of what is "normal," doctors say. Other parents may not see weight in their child as an issue so long as he or she is happy.

For the study, questionnaires were mailed to a random sample of 1,200 family physicians and community pediatricians.

A total of 464 family doctors and 396 pediatricians responded.

The study's lead author said obesity isn't a simple problem that can be cured with a pill. She said doctors said there was a need for more family-based interventions, greater access to government-funded dietitians and community fitness programs.

The doctors also called for enhanced training in medical school on treating childhood obesity and more continuing medical education for doctors already in practice, including childhood-obesity webinars, webcasts and podcasts.

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