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Heart to Heart Talk

With Philip S. Chua, M.D.

Childhood Obesity: A Health Danger (Love Not Our Children To Death)

In our culture, a chubby kid is somehow considered a healthy child. Most TV commercials today use plump and rotund children in their food and vitamin ads. This sends a wrong and dangerous message, and a disservice to the public, especially to our youngsters. Nothing is farther from the truth. Overweight children, as shown by countless studies, are more likely to develop a cluster of health problems and their complications, compared to their peers with normal weight. The greater the weight excess ---the higher a child's body mass index (BMI), a measure of weight in relation to height --- the greater the risk of acquiring the so-called metabolic syndrome early in life, which includes type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and other cardiovascular diseases. Obesity, in children or in adult, is a significant health danger.

The Risk Factors and Some Alarming Stats

The risk factors that characterize this syndrome are elevated triglycerides (blood fats), blood sugar, and blood pressure, low HDL (High Density Lipoproteins, the good cholesterol), and abdominal obesity. These precede the development of type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular diseases.

Two out of every 3 Americans are overweight, and about half of them have gone on, or on their way, to being obese. About 15% of children between ages 6 and 19 (that's one out of 6) are overweight, and another 15% are on their way there. Two decades ago, there were only 5% overweight kids in the USA. Among those 20 and older, 30% are overweight today compared to 15.1% twenty years ago. From 1996 to 2001, there were 2 million obese teenagers and young adults. Interestingly, about 1 out of 4 dogs and cats are tipping up the scale too.

About 39% of children who are moderately obese and almost 50% of those severely obese develop the metabolic syndrome. Obviously, we are not over-feeding only ourselves to death but also our children and our pets.

The increase in the incidence of diabetes has also catapulted: from 2.8% in 1980 to 4.2% in year 2000. This and cardiovascular illnesses parallel the rate of the increasing waistline of America. Fifty percent of all obese adults have high blood

pressure. One does not have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that excess body weight predisposes people to the metabolic syndrome in both children and adults.

Not Only An Aesthetic Dilemma

The extra pounds or kilos is not only disfiguring but a most unhealthy baggage that takes its toll in terms of the development of otherwise preventable illnesses, like high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, infertility, osteoarthritis, gall bladder disease, and many forms of cancer.

"Obesity is not a cosmetic issue and preventive measures ought to be implemented to stop further weight gain," said Sonia Caprio of Yale University School of Medicine in New Haven, Connecticut, in a study published in the recent issue of the New England Journal of Medicine.

The Formula for BMI

Body Mass Index (BMI) is the more accurate way to measure body weight compared to what the scale shows. This formula takes into consideration the height of the individual. While it is not perfect (the BMI of well-conditioned athletes is usually in the obese range), but it is a more meaningful gauge health-wise for the general population. To obtain the BMI, divide the weight in pounds over the height in inches, squared, multiplied by 703, a constant. Example: 150 pounds over 60 inches, squared (150 divided by 60 times 60, or 150 divided by 3600) equals 0.041. This multiplied by the 703 equals 29.29. So, the BMI is about 29.3.

The BMI Status table reads as follows: Below 18.5 is underweight; 18.5 to 24.9, normal; 25 to 29.9, overweight; 30 to 39.9, obese; and 40 and above, morbidly obese.

The “Simple” Complex Problem

In brief, the problem is taking in too much calories and not burning enough calories to maintain a normal weight. An analogy: if you pouring 2 liters of water every minute into a balloon that has an opening below which is draining out only a liter a minute, the balloon will swell with the excess liter. Indeed, it is a simple matter of intake versus output. So, if one eats 3000 calories a day, and does not exercise and remains a couch-potato watching TV, and burns only 1500 calories a day, it is obvious by simple arithmetic that this will lead to overweight. Hence, diet (quantity and quality of food) and daily physical exercise (at least 30 minutes a day) are the key ingredients to maintaining a normal weight and a healthier body. The other important factors in the equation are abstinence from tobacco, intelligent moderation in alcohol intake, and stress management and relaxation. Naturally, regular medical check-up and religious compliance with prescription medications are also essential.

Timing of the Strategy

The best time to start this strategy for health and disease prevention is during childhood, starting from the crib. That's when the brain is more receptive to teaching and when preferences and habits are just beginning to develop. But it is always never too late to start, no matter how old a person is. Adopting a healthy lifestyle is always timely, anytime, at any stage in life.

The Sensible Diet

We have discussed this issue a few times in this column. And like what we have stated before, one does not have to go into those expensive diet foods, or pills or potions, which may not be safe, or might even be outright dangerous. With more than a dozen of confusing this-and-that or so-and-so diets in the market today, where medical logic and common sense have often been neglected and are wanting, I advocate a plain, simple, inexpensive, and sensible formula. The basic principle to maintain a normal weight requires intake of calories (quantity of food) should closely approximate the output of energy (physical exercise, etc). To maintain a healthy diet, one must be picky about the quality of food also. Therefore, both the quantity and the quality of food are essential.

Quality: eat foods that have proven scientifically to be healthy foods, which include fish, vegetables, fruits, nuts and grains, low fat/low cholesterol, high fiber diet (minimizing red meats and eggs and dairy products). For adults, skim milk is preferred; for growing children, 2% milk; for infants, breast milk, and if supplement is needed, formula milk as prescribed by the pediatrician. Carbohydrates (the "sweets," rice, potato, bread, non-diet pop drinks, ice cream, cakes, candies, etc) are a great culprit in weight increase. I recommend low-carb diet and at the same time staying away from red meats and eggs. This is where I differ strongly with the Adkins diet, which advocates low carbohydrates but encourages practically unlimited red meats, eggs, and other dairy products. People will do well with low-carb diet for weight reduction, but to substitute high fat and high cholesterol (red meats and eggs, etc) for carbohydrates is blatantly unhealthy. One may lose weight on Adkins, but this high fat-high cholesterol regimen will tremendously increase the risk of cardiovascular diseases and cancer.

Quantity: eat the same amount, if you have normal (BMI) weight; if underweight, eat more until you see the scale swinging up towards what is normal for you; if overweight, eat less quantity, until the scale starts going down; if morbidly obese, consult your physician, besides cutting down on your food intake. This requires daily to weekly (same day and time each week) weighing schedule to really monitor the progress of the strategy. Daily exercises is an essential part of this regimen for a healthier lifestyle, not only for weight control but for the maintenance of overall health. Studies have shown that daily exercises, besides lowering body fats and cholesterol and resulting in a leaner, stronger, and a more beautiful physique, also strengthen the immune system, lowering the risk and incidence of cancer,

cardiovascular illness, hypertension and diabetes, besides, common colds, influenza, etc.

Let's Not Love Our Children to Death

Let us teach our children, starting from the crib, on how to live a healthy lifestyle (by example), and not expose or condone them to acquire the bad and dangerous habits we have developed over the years. We must learn how to say “no” to our children for their own good, even if it hurts us. Instead of trying to be popular with our kids, let's protect them. We certainly do not want to love them to ill-health and premature death.