

Editorial

Childhood overweight and obesity are serious public health problems worldwide. Factors such as inadequate nutrition and decreased practice of exercise, are modifiable variables, therefore, overweight and obesity should be prevented from very early ages, to reduce the likelihood of suffering later in life of diabetes, cardiovascular disease, stroke, and some types of cancer. In addition, overweight and obesity, are linked to leading causes of deaths globally.

In Costa Rica, data from the 2008-2009 National Nutrition Survey indicate that 8.1% of children between 1 and 4 years of age, are overweight; 11.8% of children 5 to 12 years are overweight and 9.6% are obese (based from their Body Mass Index). In the general adolescent population, overweight represents 14.7% of this population and obesity is 6.1%. This data has also been confirmed by the first Height and Weight Census in Schoolchildren (2017) by researchers from the School of Nutrition at the University of Costa Rica that have been studying this topic for more than a decade. The census shows that slightly more than one third of the study population, 34% (N = 118,078) of school-aged boys and girls are overweight.

According to the School of Nutrition of the University of Costa Rica, obesity represents in Costa Rica, a major predisposing factor to these chronic diseases mentioned above, which represent the main causes of morbidity in the country, and medical consultations at the Caja Costarricense del Seguro Social (Costa Rican Social Insurance Fund, in charge of most of the nation's public health sector). The problem lies, according to experts, that still in most public schools and in the community, there is access to unhealthy foods. For example, foods consumed during school snacks are products with high content of fats, sugars, sodium and are deficient in essential nutrients. They reported a low consumption of fruits and vegetables. Also, the School of Nutrition of the University of Costa Rica, report a high consumption of sugar-loaded drinks, such as sodas, sweetened teas and fruit juices, a large part of the problem drinks, instead of water. A general trend in the country has been to replace the traditional nutrient rich diet, for processed foods, high in fat, sugar and refined carbohydrates.

We know that good nutrition plays an important role in the development and protection of oral health. A good diet allows a strong and functional immune system. We also know the influence of nutrition on the appearance of cavities, not only dependent on the type of food, but on the frequency, and when the aliments are ingested. If carbohydrates are ingested and a proper oral hygiene is not carried out, the sugars are fermented in response to periods of low ph, and can cause the demineralization of teeth by acid-producing bacteria on dental biofilms. In addition, we know about different studies that establish associations between negative trend eating patterns and gingivitis.

The School of Nutrition of the University of Costa Rica has called for other sectors of the University to oversee the welfare of schoolchildren by further analyzing and comprehending the nutritional situation of the population in general. As part of this initiative, researchers from the School of Dentistry are working with Nutritionists from the School of Medicine, to determine in a near future, at a national level, the nutritional and oral health status of Costa Rican schoolchildren, and if differences exist in different geographical areas of the country. An aim is to make scientific bases in order to make nutritional interventions guided by experts, that encourages nutritional quality not quantity. As a first step, it is necessary among professionals that offer direct attention to the general public, to unify knowledge and educate the school population to develop sustainable healthy eating habits and proper oral hygiene behaviors. Proper nutrition and the establishment of appropriate oral hygiene habits in children, can contribute to a healthy lifestyle, and also prevent the development of other chronic non-communicable calls diseases. This is a starting point to undertake disease prevention and health promotion actions, based on educational and comprehensive strategies.

Data taken from:

Ministerio de Salud de Costa Rica. Encuesta Nacional de Nutrición 2008-2009. Fascículo Antropometría. San José, Costa Rica: Ministerio de Salud; 2012.

Pronunciamento en relación con la salud y nutrición en Costa Rica, según los resultados del reciente Censo Escolar de Peso y Talla/2017. Acuerdo firme, sesión No. 142-2017, artículo 4, de la Asamblea de Escuela de Nutrición celebrada el 19 de abril de 2017.

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