

# BABIES' FAT

Children in India are increasingly becoming too overweight to be healthy



### Kiran Yadav

**I**T IS A very emotional subject, indeed, especially for parents. Chances are that they might interpret your "your child is quite heavy" remark in just two ways—you'd either be considered rude or outright jealous (more so, if you have a leaner kid yourself). However, denial, whether it is outright or subtle, cannot suppress the fact that the incidence of obesity in Indian children is definitely on the rise.

"Very few studies have been done here, but estimates suggest that

6.2% of children in India are obese and another 8.4% overweight," says Dr Rajiv Chhabra, Consultant Paediatric & Neonatal Intensivist, Artemis Health Institute, Gurgaon. About 8-10% of the patients he receives suffer from weight problems, an ailment that he happens to detect during routine check-ups he conducts. "I do the BMI calculations as well," he adds. And it's no mean task for him to explain to parents why weight, though a secondary problem, happens to be a more serious concern than what they had approached him for, which is usually cough, cold or fever.

"Worldwide, 27% of the children are overweight and 17% fall in the obese category," says Dr Randeep Wadhawan, HoD, minimal access and bariatric surgery, Fortis, Delhi. The culprit? The usual sedentary lifestyle and, of course, the couch. "The government recommends no more than seven hours of TV for children in a week. But the children clock in an average of three hours each day." Wadhawan views it "a vicious cycle". Weight problems decrease mobility. And what do you tend to do when at home—eator,

aptly put, overeat!"

In America, as anyone would guess, the problem is worse. A new study from the Kaiser Family Foundation released this month suggests that over the past five years, young people have increased the amount of time they spend consuming media from six hours, 21 minutes to seven hours, 38 minutes. Quite akin to the amount of time the parent must be spending at work. But unlike the five-day average work week, children spend seven days doing just that. Incidentally, the study reveals that the use of every type of media has increased over the past 10 years, with the exception of reading. In the past five years alone, the increases range from 24 minutes a day for video games, to 27 minutes a day for computers, 38 minutes for TV content, and 47 minutes a day for music and other audio. The time spent in reading has fell from 43 to 38 minutes a day.

"Today, both parents happen to be working. Resultantly, controlling children's diet as well as monitoring their lifestyles has become difficult. Moreover, it is not easy for parents to accept that their children are fat. More than often, they interpret 'fat' as 'healthy'," says Dr Wadhawan.

The problem becomes acute when parents try to compensate for their guilt of neglecting children by indulging them. Demand for burgers, French fries, instant noodles, etc, is met with least resistance. Af-

ter all, it's easier for them to toss a packet of chips or cookies in the school bag than pack a sandwich for the lunch break. Little wonder, the Indian branded-snack market is estimated to be around \$1.34 billion and is growing strong at 15-20% per annum.

"Obesity has become an increasingly important medical problem in children and adolescents. Among the most common conditions found to be associated with primary childhood obesity are hypertension, Type-2 diabetes, pulmonary complications such as asthma, sleep apnea, musculoskeletal problems and psychosocial problems," says Dr Anupam Sibal, senior pediatrician & group medical director, Apollo Hospitals.

"Children today are also increasingly being affected by metabolic syndrome (cluster of various risk factors), excess facial hair, polycystic ovarian syndrome and infertility in females. The adolescents group of children (14-18 years) are most affected," adds Dr Anoop Misra, National Foundation of Diabetes, Obesity and Cholesterol Disorders, Fortis, Delhi. A study conducted by his group found that one in every three children eats out once or more in a week; 36.4% children eat pizzas once or more in a week and not more than 68% children spend time in outdoor activities, indicating lack of physical activity.

Apart from the wrong lifestyle, hypothyroidism and genetic causes may also result in excessive weight gain. "In 15 years the explosion will be alarming, with 40% of the children in overweight or obese category," warns Dr Anjana Bhan, endocrinologist, Max Healthcare, Delhi. "This, however, makes for a very small fraction," says Dr Bhan, adding that there is no regulatory body in India such as the US Preventive Services Task Force to set guidelines. Just this week, the Task Force has recommended that school-aged youngsters and teens should be screened for obesity. "In any classroom, you'll find at least 15-20% of the children to be obese. Often, parents complain that children don't get any time to play."

At times, a lot of other seemingly unrelated medical problems could stem from excessive weight and their treatment is the trickiest part.

A couple of months ago Dr Bhan was referred a 15-year-old child weighing 80 kg. The back and front of the child's neck was dark and the diagnosis established it as Acanthosis Nigricans, pigmentation of the skin. The tests she conducted revealed that the patient also suffered from high BP, cholesterol and the sugar was also borderline high. The case fitted well in the category of metabolic syndrome. Medication and diet regime not only helped the child lose weight but also indirectly helped in treating the skin pigmentation around the neck.

"Parents think the 'baby fat' shall disappear with age. They fail to understand that childhood obesity mostly results into adult obesity. It takes a lot of continuous and consistent effort to shed this baby fat," says Dr Misra. His remedy is good counselling, something that his study, published in the current *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, has just proved.