

A study on the association of food habits and childhood obesity in school children of ages 6-14 in Sudharma College, Magalle, Galle in Southern Province

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Childhood obesity is a rising public health concern globally and in Sri Lanka, contributing to various health complications. Poor dietary habits, including frequent consumption of energy-dense, processed, and sugary foods, are key contributors to obesity in school-aged children. This study investigates the prevalence of childhood obesity and its association with dietary habits among 6-14-year-old school children attending Sudharma College, Galle, Southern Province. A cross-sectional study was conducted among 508 school children, with Body Mass Index measurements used to determine obesity prevalence. Interviewer administered questionnaire assessed their dietary habits, meal frequency, snack consumption, and food preferences. Descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used to analyze the association between food habits and obesity. Ethical approval was obtained from Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Indigenous Medicine, University of Colombo (ERC 24/231). Written informed consent was obtained from parents/guardians and assent was taken from the children. The prevalence of obesity was 14.7% (n=75), with the highest rate among children aged 12-14 years (37.3%). Males showed a higher prevalence (65.3%) compared to females (34.7%). Key dietary behaviors contributing to obesity included daily consumption of sugary drinks (88%), fast food (68%), and processed foods (77.3%). Among obese children, 85.3% consumed snacks before meals, and 61.3% preferred processed foods over home-cooked meals. A significant proportion (61.3%) reported eating while watching television or using a device. Only 10.7% were aware of sugar content in snacks. Unhealthy dietary patterns are significantly associated with obesity in school-aged children. These findings emphasize the urgent need for targeted nutritional interventions; behavior change strategies and school-based programs to promote healthy eating and prevent childhood obesity in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: *Childhood obesity, Dietary habits, School children, Sugary drinks*