Active Childhood for Healthy Adulthood

Dear Editor,

Apropos commentary on the modern day epidemic of obesity by Yadav [1]. We are increasingly being confronted with the younger generation, having a strong tendency towards corpulence. It is now appreciated that the foundation for an unhealthy adulthood is being laid at a very early stage in life. The primary culprit, would probably be the attitude of sloth that has crept into the psyche of youth, with satellite television and now the internet partaking in the blame. Combined with the easy access to high calorie and processed foods this leads to apprehensions of an epidemic of malnutrition, with obesity being one end of the spectrum.

It has been accepted that moderate physical activity can reduce substantially the risk of developing or dying from heart disease, diabetes, colon cancer, and high blood pressure [2]. On an average, physically active people outlive those who are inactive. The current Public Health recommendations are reviewed below for ease of reference. One must begin by acquainting a child with what could be the possible benefits of physical activity [3], namely that regular physical activity in childhood and adolescence improves strength and endurance; helps build healthy bones and muscles; helps control weight; reduces anxiety and stress and increases self-esteem. The greatest impact of exercise is on the retention of weight loss. This is widely supported by the prospective and retrospective studies reviewed by Votruba et al [4]. Individuals who exercise experience a significantly smaller amount of weight regain.

On the flip side, the evil consequences of physical inactivity [3] must be brought to the fore for impressionable young individuals to make a decision (encouraged of course, by parents!) - inactivity and poor diet cause at least 300,000 deaths a year in the United States; only tobacco use causes more preventable deaths; overweight persons have physical complaints like feet, knee and back problems; obese individuals are perceived to be unattractive; adults who are less active are at greater risk of dying of heart disease and developing diabetes, colon cancer, and high blood pressure.

Young people can build healthy bodies and establish healthy lifestyles by including physical activity in their daily lives. However, many young people are not physically active on a regular basis, and physical activity declines dramatically during adolescence. School programs, and parental encouragement and involvement can help young people get active and stay active. The World Health Day theme for 2002 "Move for Health" was thus an apt rallying point.

It has been recommended that the combination of reductions in energy intake and increase in energy expenditure, through structured exercise and other forms of physical activity, be a component of weight loss intervention programs. Significant health benefits can be recognized with participation in an accumulated minimum of 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise per week and overweight and obese adults should progressively increase to this initial exercise goal [5].

Everyone can benefit from a moderate amount of physical activity on most, if not all, days of the week. Young people should be encouraged to select activities they enjoy, to fit into their daily lives. Examples of moderate activity adapted from CDC Guidelines [3] include - walking 3.2 km in 30 minutes or running 2.4 km in 15 minutes (The Satisfactory grading in PPT of the Army may possibly have preceded this recommendation by years); bicycling 8 km in 30 minutes or 6.4 km in 15 minutes. Dancing fast for 30 minutes or jumping rope for 15 minutes; playing basketball for 15-20 minutes or volleyball for 45 minutes.

Increasing the frequency, time, or intensity of physical activity can bring even more health benefits - up to a point. Too much physical activity can lead to injuries and other health problems. Hence caution is to be advocated.

Key Messages :

Physical activity for young people is most likely to be effective when the emphasis is on enjoyable participation in physical activities that are easily done throughout life, for example walking is a sustainable activity, while running may not be

Parents and the schools have an important responsibility to give young people the skills and confidence they need to be physically active

Promotion of physical activity through a coordinated school health program may play a very important role in our urban Indian milieu, with the lack of space in our cities, where only schools might have the open spaces and playgrounds.

The most important lesson that is to be imbibed is that some form of physical activity must be indulged in, on most days of the week, preferably daily.

References

1. Yadav YK. Obesity : A Modern Day Plague. MJAFI 2002;58:60-5.
2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Physical Activity and Health : A Report of the Surgeon General. Atlanta, GA : Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 1996.
3. Centers for Disease Control. Guidelines for School and Community Programs : Promoting Lifelong Physical Activity, An Overview. <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dash/physact.htm>.
4. Votruba SB, Horvitz MA, Schoeller DA. The role of exercise in the treatment of obesity. Nutrition 2000;16:179-88.
5. Jakicic JM, Clark K, Coleman E et al. American College of Sports Medicine Position Stand. Appropriate intervention strategies for weight loss and prevention of weight regain for adults. Med Sci Sports Exerc 2001;33(12):2145-56.

Maj MP Cariappa*, Lt Col LS Vaz*, Dr Parul Sehgal*

*Officer Commanding, *Consultant Physician, Station Health Organisation, Ramgarh Cantt, *DADH, Head Quarter, 26 Inf Div, C/o, 56 APO.