



Understanding obesity among children

BY BEATRICE NAKIBUUKA

On March 4 every year, the world celebrates World Obesity Day to raise awareness about the increasing number of adults and children who are overweight. More children in Uganda and around the world today are becoming overweight or obese.

Obesity happens when a person has too much body fat for their age and height. Doctors check this using a measurement called Body Mass Index (BMI). For children, BMI is compared with growth charts to see whether their weight is healthy. Not every big child is unhealthy.

Why are children gaining more weight?

One main reason is changes in diet. Dr Haruna Kiberu, a general physician, says many children eat more processed foods such as French fries, sausages, biscuits and fried snacks. These foods often contain too much sugar, salt and unhealthy fats.

"Sugary drinks are also a big problem. Sodas and packaged juices contain a lot of sugar. When children drink them often, the extra sugar turns into fat in the body," he says.

Another reason is lack of physical activity. In the past, many children walked long distances to school and played outside every evening. Today, some children are driven to school. After school, they spend many hours watching television, using smartphones or playing video games.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends that children should get at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day. This can include running, playing football, skipping rope or dancing.

Health problems caused by obesity

1. Many people think obesity only causes problems in adulthood. However, it can affect children too.
2. Children who are obese are more likely to develop high blood pressure. This can damage the heart and blood vessels. They are also at risk of type 2 diabetes, a disease that affects how the body uses sugar.
3. Extra weight can cause breathing problems, especially during sleep. It can also lead to joint pain because the knees and hips carry too much weight.
4. Some children may also feel sad or ashamed if they are teased about their weight. This can lower their confidence and affect their school performance.

How can children stay healthy?

Children should eat balanced meals, drink water eat fruits and also be active every day. They should walk and limit screen time and get enough sleep.

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