

PARENTING

When your child's weight is at stake

Experts sound alarm that overly chubby infants may have health issues in future

ASHLEY CHIA
ashley@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE—The myth of raising children to be plump and cuddly may not be as rife as before, even though there is a handful here who still have the misconception.

This fallacy, coupled with other factors such as children leading more sedentary lives and their diet, is increasing the risk of them becoming obese or contracting diabetes, heart disease and sleep apnoea. Type 2 diabetes mellitus now accounts for up to a third of all childhood diabetes in Singapore, while about 8 per cent of children entering Primary 1 are overweight, according to data from the Health Promotion Board (HPB).

A 33-year-old parent, who wanted to be known as Hana, is far from worried about the potential health risks, even though her seven-year-old son — who stands at 1.2m tall and weighs 35kg — is considered overweight. “He’s been quite chubby since he was a baby and I’m sure he will lose the weight as he grows older,” she said.

But parents should not bank on the idea that their children will shed

the extra weight during adolescence, said Mr Derrick Ong, Director of nutrition consultancy Eat Right. They should instead rely on a healthy, well-balanced diet and an active lifestyle, he added.

“A chubby baby may grow into an overweight child and eventually an overweight adult, which would increase the risk of them developing metabolic diseases like diabetes and heart diseases,” Mr Ong said.

Excessive feeding at a young age is also a contributing factor as this could result in excessive weight gain early in life, said National University Hospital dietician Charlotte Lin.

Although choice of food and lack of activity are largely responsible for the rise in numbers, there is growing evidence that chronic diseases in adulthood such as obesity and diabetes may have been “programmed” during the foetal and early stages of growth and development, said HPB chief executive officer Ang Hak Seng.

“What worries me is that some expectant mothers overeat because they have the misconception that they must eat for two, or that it is healthy to have a big and fat baby. Such misconceptions are unhealthy,” he added.

When it comes to pregnant women overindulging, Dr Tan Eng Loy, Associate Consultant at the Singapore General Hospital Department

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HEALTH PROMOTION BOARD CEO

of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, suggested there could be a “possible psychological component” to such behaviour.

“Pregnant women often behave the way they have been taught culturally to behave, giving in to unhealthy and irrational eating habits, believing subconsciously that such behaviour can be justified in pregnancy,” he said.

Only an additional 300 kilocalories (kcal) a day is required for pregnant women, which is not much, considering the average women consumes about 1,700kcal, said Dr Tan Thiam Chye, a consultant at the KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology.

To ensure a healthy pregnancy, it is not recommended for expectant mothers to count their calories but rather to maintain a balanced diet, which will enable them to gain the 10kg to 12kg of weight necessary for pregnancy, Dr Tan said.