

Healthy eating habits: results from an observational study among Italian school children

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Introduction

Childhood obesity is a major problem in Western countries as it involves effects on social, psychological and physical health of children. Unhealthy eating habits and incorrect lifestyles are risk factors for several chronic diseases in adulthood. In Italy, children are at high risk of obesity. The acquisition of the principles of proper nutrition is essential in the process of educating children¹, and nurses may play a pivotal role as educators.

Objective

The aim of this research was to evaluate school children's knowledge on healthy nutrition and correct eating habits.

Methods

A multicentric observational study was carried out between January and March, 2015. It involved pupils attending the 4th and 5th year of elementary school in three schools of Abruzzo, one of the Italian Regions with the higher number of obese children. Data were collected using a multiple-choice questionnaire.

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Results

A total of 122 children, aged between 9-11 years, mainly females (53%), fulfilled the questionnaire. Mean height, weight, and BMI are 139.8 (± 12) cm, 36.4 (± 7.9) kg e 18.3 (± 3.05), respectively. Considering eating habits, it appears that almost all of the children consume three meals a day, with dinner being the preferred one (32%). Usually, during the dinner the whole family eats together (58.2%). Fish, vegetables, and fruit are consumed less than twice a week by 59%, 27%, and 22.1% of the sample. 66% of children rated themselves as quite knowledgeable about nutrition, and general knowledge on healthy eating appears quite satisfactory: most children know that a healthy growth depends on what they eat (84%), it is important to eat fruits and vegetables (96%), playing sports (89%), limiting sweets' consumption (64%), and restricting fast-food eating (89%). However, only 45% of the sample have a snack throughout the day, 69% like to eat always the same things, and 86% eat between meals.

Conclusion

Results shows positive habits and quite good knowledge regarding a healthy growth among school children. They may have been influenced by some educational programs for school children carried out to raise awareness to healthy lifestyles. Furthermore, some bad habits remain needing correction. Additional educational interventions, targeting both children and parents could be useful to obtain an improvement in lifestyle and health status.

References

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