

Parental perceptions of child's healthy diet: Evidence from a rapidly developing country

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Introduction: The childhood obesity epidemic has significant public health concern as obesity is linked to many chronic and life-threatening physical and psychological health conditions. There are no studies in Qatar or in the Middle East to investigate parental perception of healthy diet in childhood.

Objective: The specific objectives were to assess parental views on a healthy diet; the quality of food provided and parental concerns about obesity; and, sources of information about healthy diet

Methods: Cross-sectional prospective study at Hamad Medical Corporation, State of Qatar. Parents of children <14 years old were invited to complete a questionnaire.

Results & Discussion: A total of 398 parents agreed to participate, while 22 parents refused (response rate 94%). About 80% of parents were between 20 and 39 years of age, and 77% were females. Around 230 (58%) parents had ≥1 housemaid to help with housework, including food preparation. Whilst 151 children (37%) fell into the overweight and obese category, only 68 parents (17%) perceived that their child was in this category. Less than half the participants (n = 179, 45%) stated that childhood weight should be monitored prior to 5 years of age, while around 35% stated the same, but for children ages 5-14 years. Most participants (n = 324, 81%) agreed that parental eating habits could influence childhood weight. In terms of food preparation at home, mothers cooked almost 50% of the times, housemaids 30%, followed by grandmothers (16.6%), and fathers (3.4%). When asked about the frequency of school meals being prepared at home, 237 parents (60%) prepared their children's lunch box only 1-2 times per week. Moreover, 63% of parents chose the quality of food based on nutritional values, while 44% and 35% chose it based on safety and taste, respectively. When queried about whether the child's pediatrician or the primary care physician counsel families regarding childhood healthy diet, 187 families (47%) had not received counseling by their children's health care providers. Most families agreed that healthy diets lead to better school performance (n = 372, 94%) and better physical activity quality (n = 379, 96%). Compared to families living in the rural areas, parents living in the capital Doha had better insights that healthy diets result in better in school performance (p = 0.032).

Conclusion: Parental perception is an important target for public health interventions. Within the current sample, families were aware of the positive impact of healthy diet on overall wellbeing. Qatar is a well-resourced country and it would be cost effective to train and professionally develop pediatricians and primary care physicians to be more proactive in tackling childhood obesity.

Keywords: Children; Qatar; Healthy diet; Parental perception.