

Heart and Stroke Foundation reports on the health of Ontario children

By Randy Ray

A new report on the health of Ontario children shows kids continue to face an unhealthy childhood due to a lack of physical activity and poor eating habits.

The report, released in early September by the Heart and Stroke Foundation, points out that if the situation doesn't improve soon, this generation of children, through no fault of their own, will live shorter lives than their parents, due to the risk of developing life-threatening illnesses such as high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

Particularly worrisome, says the report, is that a decade after a similar survey pointed out similar problems, eating and exercise habits are no better in several areas.

For instance, in 1998, one in five children were eating five or more servings of fruit and vegetables daily, which just meets Canada's Food Guide daily-recommended minimum. In 2009, the prevalence dropped to one in eight children.

In 1998, a Heart and Stroke Foundation national sample of parents of children aged six to 12, found only one in five children was eating the recommended five or more daily servings of fruit and vegetables and only one in three was eating whole grain breads or cereals. Almost one-quarter (24%) ate some form of junk food (chips, French fries, candy or chocolate bars) three or more times a week.

The good news appeared to be related to physical activity patterns, with 88% of parents reporting that their children were physically active during the summer. However, the same parents reported that during winter, the proportion that was active would drop dramatically, to only 66%.

Fast forward 10 years and the findings aren't much different, which is worrisome given the rising tide of overweight and obesity among children in Ontario, says the latest report. The encouraging news is that parents are reporting more whole-grain consumption: almost half of Ontario's children appear to be eating whole grains. But junk food consumption has remained consistent, with three-quarters of children still consuming high fat, high-sugar or high-salt snack foods up to twice a week. One out of four (24%) parents reported their children eat junk food three or more times a week.

The proportion that is active during the summer has remained consistent (89% in 2009 vs. 88% in 1998). There has also been a significant decline in the proportion of Ontario's kids who are physically active three or more times a week during winter (57% in 2009 compared to 66% 10 years ago).

In an interview, Heart & Stroke Foundation spokesman, Dr. Andrew Pipe, who is also Chief of the Division of Prevention and Rehabilitation at the University of Ottawa Heart Institute, said the problem is quite simply that children are eating poorly and getting too little exercise. The problem won't be rectified until policy makers and parents make drastic changes, he added.

“It is a complex issue and no one single fix is going to help it. We know we can no longer deal with the issue by using fridge magnets and behavioral strategies. The social and physical environment we have created is unlikely to improve unless there are changes in those environments ... we need changes in policies that deal with physical education and food in the school systems, we need public transportation strategies, food policies and an array of interventions or the situation will not get better, it will get worse.”

“We are now looking at a population of young people whose life expectancy may be less than that of their parents; we are not used to experiencing that in the western world in the last 100 years.”

Dr. Pipe is blunt about the environment that is making Ontario kids chubby and unhealthy.

“When they come home from school, one door closes and another door opens – the fridge door. They stay inside, they sit in front of a computer screen and they drink and eat. In my generation, we used to be out playing hockey and tag and games. Today, we have parental concerns about security of children that are highly inflated. There is no evidence kids are any more at risk today (than in the past).”

Although 95 per cent of children have bikes, only five per cent ride them to school and in many suburbs, poor urban planning forces residents to drive rather than bike or walk to neighbourhood stores and other services. As a result, they aren't getting exercise and are packing on the pounds.

“The reality is these kids are into patterns of obesity and extra weight that will be reflected in an obese and overweight adult population, with more diabetes, more heart disease and circulatory disorders and this will place a significant burden on the health system with costs we will all have to pay,” says Dr. Pipe.

To combat obesity and lack of exercise, he recommends parents “change the policies that apply in their own households. Send the kids out to play and have them get involved in spontaneous physical activity ... that is instrumental in optimizing their growth and development.”

Parents, he said, should also rethink their household food policy by minimizing their kids’ exposure to fast food and restaurants and by being careful to avoid processed foods that are high in sugars, salts and fats.

They should also encourage family togetherness so that they are doing things together that involve physical activity. “In Ottawa, we are blessed with the canal, cross country skiing, canoeing, biking on paths ... if you can’t do it in Ottawa, it is hard to do it anywhere in the country. All of these kinds of family decision should be revisited.”

Dr. Pipe also urged parents to think hard when enrolling their kids in organized sports. He stressed that he is not opposed to organized sports but said moms and dads, when studying various kiddy sports and activities, should take note of the fact that some sports, hockey for instance, involve far more time standing or sitting than others, such as soccer where there is ongoing aerobic activity.

And there’s more: rather than sitting back and watching as their kids’ primary and secondary schools organize chocolate bar sales to raise money, they should stand up and suggest fundraisers such as jump rope competitions or walkathons that involve physical activity.

To read The 2009 Heart and Stroke Report on the Health of Ontario’s Kids, visit:
www.heartandstroke.ca/spark

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