



SPECIAL REPORT

Quarter of our teens too fat

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FAMILY

A QUARTER of Geelong teenagers are overweight or obese, prompting calls for urgent action by schools and parents.

Research released by the Australian Medical Association (AMA) this week has revealed almost 20 per cent of secondary school students are overweight and 5 per cent are obese.

The research, published in the February issue of the *Medical Journal of Australia*, revealed overweight students were typically boys who spent large amounts of time using electronic media and did not get enough sleep at night.

They were also likely to come from low socio-economic backgrounds and do little exercise.

Obesity Policy Coalition

executive manager Jane Martin yesterday said teenagers who were overweight were more likely to develop chronic disease as adults than kids who were fit and healthy.

It was vital action was taken across communities to wind back the number of unhealthy teenagers, she said.

"This is really concerning because it's hard to change habits that have become embedded," Ms Martin said.

When trying to help a teen lose weight and get fit it was important not to make the child feel self-conscious or bad about themselves by pointing the finger, she said.

Parents who were concerned their teen was overweight should find ways to decrease the amount of time they were sedentary, and

increase their daily exercise, rather than try to put them on a diet, Ms Martin said.

"It's not helpful for adolescents to diet, in fact it's very unhelpful," she said.

"It needs to be talked about in a sensitive way to make sure there's no unintended consequences.

"What we are advocating is creating a supportive environment."

This involved the whole family making an effort to eat healthily, watch less television and do more activity, rather than simply instructing the teenager to change their behaviour, Ms Martin said.

More than 12,000 students across Australia were studied as part of the AMA research, which was jointly funded by the National Heart Foun-

dation and state cancer councils.

Medical advisor for Barwon Medicare Local (formerly the Geelong GP Association), Dr Jane Opie, said the shocking teen obesity statistics were representative of the picture in Geelong.

"What we have witnessed (in Geelong) is certainly kids getting fatter," Dr Opie said. "This has been a progressive trend."

To break the trend, healthy eating habits needed to start early in life, she said.

Dr Opie also recommended limiting screen time - television, computers and gaming - to less than two hours a day.

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PARENTS' GUIDE

WHAT TO DO

- Provide opportunities to exercise as a family.
- Lead by example by being active yourself.
- Encourage your teen to participate in a team or solo sport they enjoy.
- Eat meals together at the dinner table when possible.

WHAT NOT TO DO

- Tell your teen they are fat.
- Put your teen on a diet.
- Force your child to participate in an activity or sport they do not enjoy.

