



## JUNKFOOD GENERATION



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# JUNKFOOD GENERATION

HEALTHIER FOOD, MORE ACTIVE PLAY TIME AND PROACTIVE PARENTING ALL PLAY A ROLE IN ENSURING OUR LITTLE ONES DON'T GROW BIG BEFORE THEIR TIME.

A sweeping tide of obesity is flowing across our planet, with more than 9 million adults classified as morbidly obese. However, it's not just adults who are stacking on far too many extra kilos. According to the latest Australian National Health Survey, 25 per cent of kids aged five to 17 are overweight or obese. A survey by the New Zealand Ministry of Health also shows one New Zealand child in five is overweight and one in 12 is obese.

So why are even our littlest citizens fighting the battle of the bulge? The two major culprits seem to be rising levels of inactivity and increasing consumption of unhealthy kilojoule-laden food.

### CHANGING FOOD HABITS

In past generations school lunches were simple sandwiches and pieces of fruit tucked into brown paper bags. Other than the loathed government-supplied bottle of milk

each day, kids would race off to the school bubbler to quench their thirst. Take a peek inside the average kid's lunchbox these days and alongside a sandwich and fruit, you'll probably find mini packs of biscuits, snack-sized crisps, processed fruit bars, packaged muesli bars and a boxed fruit juice.

Childhood also used to be about active play. Kids walked to school or rode their bikes. Weekends and after school, Mum was home to offer healthy after-school snacks and kids played outside: games of chasings or hide and seek, swimming in creeks, and building go-karts and tree houses. They ran wild and free, returning home with tousled hair, grubby faces and scraped knees only when their stomachs grumbled with hunger and it was too dark to see the footy they were kicking about with their friends.

These days, kids spend hours engaged in inactive screen time — watching DVDs on big-screen TVs and playing with iPods, Facebook, computer games, PlayStations and Xbox. And while they're viewing TV and social media sites, they're also being bombarded with junkfood advertising.

### UNHEALTHY LITTLE AUSSIES

Childhood obesity can be associated with high blood pressure, high cholesterol, asthma and sleep apnoea. Professor Peter Clifton, Head of Nutritional Intervention at Baker IDA Heart and Diabetes Institute, says the health risks associated with carrying extra kilos are of great concern. "Childhood obesity can lead directly to increased risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and hypertension in adulthood," he says. "In fact, paediatric hospitals are now seeing teenagers already with type 2 diabetes, a condition that was virtually unheard of in that age group just a few decades ago."

Another concern is that many parents fall into the trap of thinking "it's just puppy fat". Professor Clifton says parents should not buy into the belief that their child will automatically outgrow their childhood

chubbiness. "Even overweight preschoolers have an extremely high risk of becoming overweight adults — up to 70 or 80 per cent of the time," he says.

Perhaps one of the saddest aspects of childhood and adolescent obesity is the psychological implications. According to the Australasian Society for the Study of Obesity, overweight kids and teens are likely to suffer from poor self-esteem and negative self-image, anxiety and loneliness.

### A DANGEROUS ADDICTION

One of the reasons for the increasing childhood obesity levels is relatively simple; parents are feeding their kids too much of the wrong kinds of foods. Clare Collins, a professor in nutrition and dietetics at the University of Newcastle, Australia, says kids are consuming, on average, 10–15 per cent more kilojoules than they were a few decades ago. "It's largely due to convenience and snack foods. These pack in far more kilojoules for the same serve size, or even a smaller serve size, than basic whole foods such as fruits, vegetables, dairy and wholegrains," she says.

Once kids develop a taste for sugary, creamy, or salty junk food, it can be hard to correct. Associate Professor Paul J. Kenny and colleagues from the Scripps Research Institute in America have shown that junkfood is highly addictive. They've discovered the same brain molecular mechanisms that drive people into drug addiction are behind the compulsion to overeat the wrong types of foods.

### PARENT POWER

The best way for kids to achieve a healthy weight range is for parents to take a proactive role in making dietary changes, according to a new study. Researchers at Wollongong and Newcastle universities have shown that, when parents choose to make positive lifestyle changes the whole family will reap the benefits. →



Junk food companies deliberately target kids in their TV commercials.



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Professor Collins and colleagues assessed more than 165 overweight children over three years. They set up three groups: the first was a parent-focused nutrition program, the second increased the child's activity levels and the third focused on both. The group with the best outcome was the parent nutrition program. "It confirmed to us that parents have a critical role in shaping their child's eating habits," she says.

To avoid your child developing an unhealthy dependency on sugary foods, it's a good idea to start early. According to Sophia Mayor, naturopath and nutritionist, educating your child can begin as soon as you introduce solids. "Instead of introducing sweet apple first to your child's palate, try a vegetable such as carrot or sweet potato," she says.

However, as any parent knows it's not always easy to get kids to try new foods — at any age. Professor Collins says if you're constantly fighting a battle there are some ways to increase your chances of success. "The key is to not make a fuss; instead praise their efforts and ignore behaviours you don't want," she says. "If your child's hanging upside down on the chair, don't worry about it but let him know how proud you are that he tasted some broccoli."

It's also a good idea to avoid bribing your kids, saying for example that if you eat your veggies you can have icecream. "You're actually sending them a message that vegetables taste so terrible they must be masked by something sweet," adds Collins. She also says there's no point having a child sit for hours until their plate is empty. "That just makes mealtimes an awful experience — but they should understand there will be no extra food offered afterwards."



Two lunchbox-size juices contain a lot of sugar, so be sure to offer water as well.

To encourage your children to choose healthy foods, get them involved in the process. Invite them along shopping and let them help to pick out healthy ingredients.

#### THE RIGHT STUFF

Avoid highly refined packaged snackfoods that convert easily to sugar and include foods that are wholesome and rich in nutrients. Mayor says proteins pack a nutritional punch that young growing bodies need. "Protein lowers the glycaemic index of meals, which in turn balances the blood sugar, supporting your child's energy needs throughout the day," she says.

Start your children's day with eggs and

wholegrain toast instead of sugary breakfast cereals. In packing your child's lunchbox, include wholegrain sandwiches or wraps with lean protein such as chicken, salmon cakes or sushi rolls with brown rice. Also include healthy muffins, yoghurt, fruit, nuts and chopped fresh vegetables such as carrot sticks and cherry tomatoes. Children should also be consuming around three serves of dairy each day.

Mayor says ensuring your child has plenty of foods containing magnesium and B group vitamins is important. These are found in whole grains, brown rice, nuts and seeds, bananas and leafy green vegetables, including kale, and broccoli. "These nutrients are depleted by highly refined diets," she says. "They're important for metabolism and blood-sugar regulation, energy levels and also mood and learning."

To encourage your children to choose healthy foods, get them involved in the process. Invite them to shop with you and let them help to pick out healthy ingredients — it's empowering for your child to help cook a family meal or make things to take to school the next day.

#### WATER IS BEST

Fruit juices, including small boxed juices, are OK for your child's diet if consumed in moderation. Professor Collins says boxed juice has extremely high sugar content. "Two small lunchbox-size juices are the equivalent of eating 4-6 pieces of fruit," she says. →



#### HEALTHY SNACK OPTIONS FOR KIDS

Providing healthy, well-balanced snacks for hungry tummies is vital. Try:

- Fruit loaf or bun
- Pikelets (with mashed banana)
- Homemade air popped corn
- Rice crackers or pretzels
- Fresh or dried fruit
- Wholemeal crackers with cheese
- Yoghurt
- Raw vegetables with dip
- Toasted English muffin
- Fruit smoothies

[Courtesy Dietitians Association of Australia]

For more information about healthy foods for kids check out Sports Dietitians Australia at [www.sportsdietitians.com.au/content/233/FuellingActiveKids](http://www.sportsdietitians.com.au/content/233/FuellingActiveKids)





## FOOD *childhood obesity*

Far better options are milk or water. Milk drinks in your child's lunchbox can be frozen to keep their lunch cool. Keep a jug of water in the fridge at home and put it on the table at mealtimes and add sliced lemon, lime or orange for a zesty tang.

### MAKE EXERCISE A FAMILY AFFAIR

It's not just the amount of junk kids are eating that's creating a generation of overweight kids. How much physical exercise does your child get each day? According to the World Health Organization, kids aged 5-17 need 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity daily. Yet it is arguably harder these days to factor exercise into your kid's lifestyle. After all, the streets aren't safe, so fewer kids walk to school or ride bikes. New homes have smaller backyards, so there's less room to run and lots more access to big-screen television and computer games. And with more dual-income families, many mums aren't home after school to shoo kids outside to play.

Why not buddy up a few kids to walk or ride to school? Involve your kids in

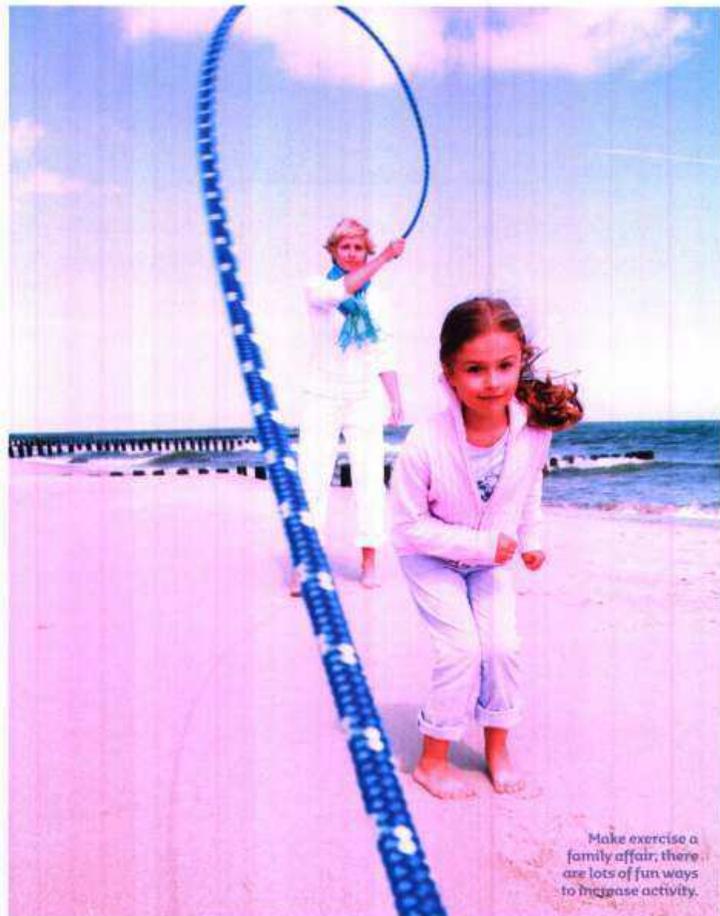
A child who views two hours of commercial television each day will be exposed to an estimated 2200 junkfood advertisements in a year.

team sport on weekends or discover your local park so you can kick a footy around. Parents need to turn off the TV and try to do something active with their kids every day. According to Sports Dietitians Australia, there are lots of fun ways to increase activity. Shoot some hoops, buy a dog (and walk it), dance to music, opt for rollerskating instead of a movie and ensure family outings include active time, such as a bushwalk.

### IS MY CHILD OVERWEIGHT?

Not sure if your child is overweight? According to Professor Collins, a good rule of thumb is their clothing size. "If your child is wearing clothing more than two sizes larger in proportion to their age, there could be an issue," she says. There are other things you can also consider: is your child out of breath after vigorous exercise or do they avoid exercise? Does your child eat far more than other kids the same height and build? Does your child look a lot bigger than other children of the same age?

Regularly monitoring your child's measurements can help them to maintain a healthy weight range. You can check



Make exercise a family affair; there are lots of fun ways to increase activity.

your child's weight via a body mass index (BMI) chart. This allows you to compare your child's weight to the ideal weight range for their age and height. Check out [www.keepkidshealthy.com/growthcharts](http://www.keepkidshealthy.com/growthcharts). If you'd like more advice, visit your health practitioner, who will be able to discuss height and weight measurements.

### JUNKFOOD ADVERTISING

Turn on the TV during primetime viewing for children and you'll be bombarded with junkfood advertising. According to watchdog group Junkbusters, a child who views two hours of commercial television each day will be exposed to an estimated 2200 junkfood advertisements in a year. Advertisers target kids and teens in a blatant grab for a larger slice of market share and to raise brand awareness. Some say what they're really doing is luring a generation of kids to develop an unhealthy taste for junk.

It's not just TV that spews out junkfood advertisements, either. There's advertising on social networking sites, in magazines and around competitions and sports sponsorship — all clever marketing tools to reach kids.

So what's being done about it?

There is a mix of enforceable and voluntary regulations aimed at controlling children's exposure to unhealthy food advertising. The question is, just how effective are they? According to the Obesity Policy Coalition, they're not effective. Senior Policy Adviser for the OPC, Jane Martin, says the Coalition is working on a plan for legislation that promises to offer protection for children from unhealthy food advertising.

"The Federal Government has given industry a chance to clean up their act but self-regulation has proven to be a complete failure," she said. "In fact, it allows junkfood companies to advertise during the highest-rating children's TV programs."

Want to voice your concerns? You can have your say and find out more at: [junkbusters.com.au/busted](http://junkbusters.com.au/busted) or [www.parentsjury.org.au](http://www.parentsjury.org.au).

Carrol Baker is a freelance journalist based in the lush tropical Sunshine Coast Hinterland. She writes for lifestyle and health magazines across Australia and loves climbing mountains, trekking and exploring the great outdoors with her young family.