

# JUNK DISEASES

The increasing tendency for in-between munchies has a debilitating effect on children's health, says Dr KULDEEP SINGH

Children find themselves amidst a complex society that is undergoing massive changes — many of them negative. Concepts, relationships, lifestyles are metamorphosed to accommodate the new jet-setting age. Food is no exception. These are no less than weapons of mass destruction and turn up at every street corner while being called by the harmless name of donuts, cheeseburgers, French fries, potato chips, softdrinks and all other kind of junk food. Healthy nutritious food has been replaced by junk food and our children are hooked. It has become the prime choice for all age groups, especially children.

The most common scenario is a child who returns from school and plonks himself in front of the television, faithfully accompanied by a bowl of wafers and a can of cola, more so in summers. Neither do the children know and nor do their parents understand the havoc they are unleashing on themselves.

The term "junk food" was coined as a slang in 1972 by Michael Jacobson, Director of the Center for Science, Washington DC.

A study published in "Pediatrics" in 2004 found that fast-food consumption in children was linked with many dangerous precursors for obesity. According to this study, kids who ate fast food were more likely to consume a higher amount of calories, fats, carbohydrates and added sugars in one meal. They were also less likely to consume fibre, milk, fruits and vegetables.

The years between six and twelve is a time of steady growth, both physical and mental and good nutrition should be a high priority. Parents should tell their children that what they eat affects their growth, feelings and behaviour. Changes in our society have intensified the need for food skills and they need to become a part of the child's basic education for good health and survival. The vast majority of working parents with school-going children are laboured with exhausting commutes, upswings in the households and stress, leading to a situation where parents spend limited time with their children.

Most people have forgotten that the primary reason for eating is nourishment. In the not so distant past, food was treated with reverence because of its life sustaining quality. Today family dinners are rare. In many ways, our culture is structured to foster bad eating habits. Parents eating junk begets children eating junk. Television commercials and supermarkets are propagating a wide variety of enticing junk foods, attractively packaged and often tagged with a tempting sop. High junk food consumers are more likely to consume take-away thrice a week, eat dinner in front of the TV, receive sweet



rewards, be allowed to consume snacks anytime, have soft drinks available at home and a TV in their bedroom.

Children don't know the relationship between heart disease, cancer, high blood pressure or diabetes with bingeing on junk food. A recent study has shown that 40 per cent of children in public schools in Delhi have childhood obesity. The study also shows that as early as the age of 30, arteries could begin to clog and lay the groundwork for future heart attacks. What children eat from puberty affects their risks of prostate and breast cancer. Weakening of bones and high blood pressure are other diseases have their earliest roots in childhood eating habits. Poor diets slow growth, decay new teeth, promote weight gain and sow the seeds of poor quality of life and diseases.

Many junk foods contain inedible colors which are carcinogenic. These also affect digestive systems, though the effects emerge after years. Food coloring causes hyperactivity and concentration lapses in children.

Nutrition indirectly impacts school performance. Poor nutrition can leave students' susceptible to illness or lead to headaches and stomachaches, resulting in school absences (Brown, Beardslee and Prothrow-Stith, 2008). Access to nutrition that incorporates protein, carbohydrates, and glucose has been shown to



improve students' cognition, concentration, and energy levels (Bellisle, 2004; Sorhaindo and Feinstein, 2006).

Recent studies have demonstrated that nutrition affects students' thinking skills, behavior, and health, that impacts academic performance. Research suggests that diets high in trans and saturated fats can negatively impact learning and memory, nutritional deficiencies early in life can affect the cognitive development of school-aged children and access to nutrition improves students' cognition, concentration, and energy levels.

Health messages are simply overwhelmed, in volume and in effectiveness, by junk-food ads that often deploy celebrities or cartoon characters to great effect.

As one example, a study in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine found that children living in neighborhoods with healthy food and safe play spaces are 56 per cent less likely to be obese than children in neighborhoods without these features.

Parents and caregivers can help children have a healthy diet and be physically active.

Help foster good eating habits. Have fresh fruits and vegetables at home for snacks. Instead of full-fat milk, yogurt, and cheese, buy low-fat or nonfat dairy products. Offer kids water or low-fat milk to drink instead of soda or juice. Limit junk. Involve children in planning and preparing meals and sit down to eat together.

Reduce screen time. Watching TV can reduce physical activity, lead to increased snacking, and expose children to advertisements for unhealthy foods.