

Promotion of Healthy Food Choices in School Children through Nutrition Education

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Abstract : Introduction: Childhood overweight increases the risk for certain medical and psychological conditions. Millions of school-age children worldwide are affected by serious yet easily treatable and preventable illnesses that inhibit their ability to learn. Healthier children stay in school longer, attend more regularly, learn more and become healthier and more productive adults. Schools are an important setting for nutrition education because one can reach most children, teachers and parents. These years offer a key window for shaping their lifetime habits, which have an impact on their health throughout life. Against this background, an attempt was made to impart nutrition education to school children in Haryana state of India to promote healthy food choices and assess the effectiveness of this program. Methodology: This study was completed in two phases. During the first phase, pre-intervention anthropometric and dietary survey was conducted; the teaching materials for nutrition intervention program were developed and tested; and the questionnaire was validated. In the second phase, an intervention was implemented in two schools of Kurukshetra, Haryana for six months by personal visits once a week. A total of 350 children in the age group of 6-12 years were selected. Out of these, 279 children, 153 boys and 126 girls completed the study. The subjects were divided into four groups namely: underweight, normal, overweight and obese based on body mass index-for-age categories. A power point colorful presentation to improve the quality of tiffin, snacks and meals emphasizing inclusion of all food groups especially vegetables every day and fruits at least 3-4 days per week was used. An extra 20 minutes of aerobic exercise daily was likewise organized and a healthy school environment created. Provision of clean drinking water by school authorities was ensured. Selling of soft drinks and energy-dense snacks in the school canteen as well as advertisements about soft drink and snacks on the school walls were banned. Post intervention, anthropometric indices and food selections were reassessed. Results: The results of this study reiterate the critical role of nutrition education and promotion in improving the healthier food choices by school children. It was observed that normal, overweight and obese children participating in nutrition education intervention program significantly ($p \leq 0.05$) increased their daily seasonal fruit and vegetable consumption. Fat and oil consumption was significantly reduced by overweight and obese subjects. Fast food intake was controlled by obese children. The nutrition knowledge of school children significantly improved ($p \leq 0.05$) from pre to post intervention. A highly significant increase ($p \leq 0.00$) was noted in the nutrition attitude score after intervention in all four groups. Conclusion: This study has shown that a well-planned nutrition education program could improve nutrition knowledge and promote positive changes in healthy food choices. A nutrition program inculcates wholesome eating and active life style habits in children and adolescents that could not only prevent them from chronic diseases and early death but also reduce healthcare cost and enhance the quality of life of citizens and thereby nations.

Keywords : children, eating habits healthy food, obesity, school going, fast foods

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