

Weight misperception and rising adolescent obesityDania Aijaz Shah,¹ Zia ud Deen,² Mohammad Osama Anwer,³ Muhammad Qasim⁴

Madam, the prevalence of adolescent obesity is escalating at an alarming rate globally.¹ Pakistan shows a variation, with extreme of obesity at one end of the spectrum and malnutrition at the other end² and weight misperception.³

Denial of being obese is a big hurdle in tackling this global epidemic. One of the major precursors of obesity is weight misperception or more commonly underweight misperception. Saleem MD et al. found a significant prevalence of weight misperception in our youth population wherein 61.8% of the students had an underweight misperception.³ Underweight misperception is defined as when an individual considers to weigh less than he/she actually is, as determined by BMI (Body Mass Index).³ Weight misperception was identified in Pakistani adult population as well where Bhanji S et al showed that 73% of obese adults considered that their weight was fine.⁴

Weight misperception is associated with lack of adequate information and plain ignorance in general population. The relatively younger age group especially obese men associate their weights to high muscle content in their body.³ A major cause of adolescent obesity is the improper attention of parents to their child's health, diet, and physically inactive routine.⁵ Parents' false views about their child's weight are a precursor of the general underweight misperception in children, as proven in a study in which 77% of parents failed to recognize obesity in their children.⁵ We believe with growing age, children are more conscious about their physical appearance, and

to be direct about their weight is deemed inappropriate by the parents hence, it is found that parents avoid using the word 'fat' as it may be considered offensive. Parents who underestimate their child's weight believe their child to be physically active and less likely to over-eat, in contrast to parents with accurate perception, who infact admit to their child's over-eating habits and indolent lifestyle.⁵

The primary solution for obesity includes restricting diet and encouraging physical exercise.¹ Provision of sports infrastructure in most institutions coupled with counseling sessions for health, fitness awareness and diet may also play a part.^{2,5} However, improvements are necessary in weight perception. Both parents and teachers need to be instructed by medical health professionals on understanding ideal weights for relevant age and height and to teach children and students to maintain suitable weights, in order to prevent obesity and pursue a healthy lifestyle.³

References

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