Dietary Characteristics of Hong Kong Young Children: Implications for Nutrition Education

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Abstract

Objectives: To examine the dietary pattern of Hong Kong young children and its implication for nutrition education. Methods: Dietary patterns of 316 children aged 6-7-years (121 overweight, 130 middle-weight and 65 low-weight children), were assessed by a standardised questionnaire and a 3-day dietary record. Results: Macronutrient composition (carbohydrates: 53%; proteins: 16% and fats: 31%) was similar in the three weight groups and in line with recommendations. Our subjects mainly consumed proteins from animal sources. Seventy-nine percent of the subjects reported routine snacking during school breaks and fat from snacks (22%) was higher than that reported in 1993 (15%). An inadequate vegetable (84 g/day) intake was observed. Absence of vegetables during lunch was reported by 22% of subjects and this was associated with eating out. Conclusion: Further nutrition education in young children in Hong Kong should focus on healthy choices of snacks, balancing animal and plant sources of proteins and adequate consumption of vegetables and fruits. The need for healthy school lunch and snack programmes should be emphasised.

Key words Children; Diet; Nutrition; Overweight

Introduction

The importance of a balanced diet for young children is obvious in terms of promoting health and optimal growth. However promotion of healthy eating is not easy in modern society where children are confronted with abundant, often unhealthy, food choices. Nutrition-related problems among 7-year-old children reported in a 1993 Hong Kong nutritional and growth survey included high serum cholesterol levels and high protein consumption. In Hong Kong the prevalence of childhood overweight and type II diabetes is on the increase. Strategies to tackle these trends will include nutritional awareness programmes to encourage healthy eating habits from a young age. Development of such programmes requires knowledge of current nutritional problems and flawed dietary habits. In 2000, a case-control study was undertaken to identify risk factors for childhood overweight and obesity in Hong Kong Chinese children aged 6-7 years old. We now report descriptive information on the dietary habits and patterns of this study sample.

Methods

Subjects

Subjects participating in a case-control study to identify risk factors of childhood overweight were recruited from primary-one students (age 6-7 years) who were attending one of 12 Student Health Service Centres of the Department of Health for their annual body check during the period February 2000 to May 2000. We developed Body Mass Index (BMI, weight in kg/height^2 in m^2) cutoffs from previous 1993 cross-sectional Hong Kong growth survey data. These cutoffs identified the 8% of children who were classified as overweight in this previous study, as well as the 10% of children in the middle weight group and the 8%