

SIMPLE HABITS

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Simple Habits And Simple Swaps Can Make A Big Difference | World Obesity Day 2025

World Obesity Day on March 4 aims to promote awareness on overweight and obesity among children, adolescents and adults.



Eating diverse, local, fresh and seasonal foods is a good practice for a healthy diet (Image Credit:Freepik)

- By Marie-Claude Desilets
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Overweight and obesity are a growing threat to children's well-being globally, largely driven by aggressive junk food marketing that increases the demand for unhealthy and highly processed foods. Lack of physical activity, a sedentary lifestyle and increasing screen time is another concern. Cumulatively, this is a recipe for an unhealthy childhood and adolescence. Obesity is a major risk factor for various noncommunicable diseases, such as type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, stroke, and various forms of cancer.

According to UNICEF, almost 40 million under-five years old children around the world are overweight, equivalent to nearly 6 percent of this age group. Among children aged 5 to 19 years, rates are significantly higher; it is estimated that more than 340 million are overweight, almost 18 percent. In India, the National Family & Health Survey 5 (2019/21) revealed that 3 percent of children under five years of age and 24 percent of women 15-49 years were overweight or obese. The trend is fast rising. These are conditions that disadvantage children from early age and can lead to a lifetime of diseases, including diabetes, hypertension, cancer and heart disease. According to WHO, globally obesity rates have nearly tripled since 1975 and have increased almost five times in children and adolescents, affecting people of all ages from all social groups in both developed and developing countries.

Marie-Claude Desilets, Chief, Nutrition UNICEF India shares ***SIMPLE HABITS AND SIMPLE SWAPS*** that can make a big difference in tackling overweight and obesity.

To make healthier food choices, it is important to read carefully the list of ingredients on food labels, including the fine print, and compare products before making a choice. Avoid consuming products with a long list of ingredients like emulsifiers, preservatives, stabilizers, fructose, corn syrup, etc. that you won't commonly find in your kitchen at home. This will help you identify and avoid junk food (ultra-processed foods and foods high in fat, salt, and/or sugar). Say no to junk food and don't be misled by marketing claims. Terms like 'low-fat', 'sugar-free', or 'organic' do not always mean that a food item is healthy.

Different foods provide a range of multiple nutrients with essential benefits. Eating diverse, local, fresh and seasonal foods is a good practice for a healthy diet. An easy hack is to eat a rainbow plate with foods of various (natural) colours every day!



Always read carefully the list of ingredients on food labels (Image:Freepik)

Don't eat the same foods every day – diversity in diet is key to fulfilling the body's requirements and living healthy. Along with good nutrition, any type of daily physical activity is also important. Don't assume overweight and obesity begin later in life.

If optimum practices of breastfeeding and complementary feeding in young children are not well adopted, and if future mothers (adolescent girls and women) have poor nutrition, children have more risks to develop overweight/obesity and non-communicable diseases during adolescence and adulthood.

Make sure you follow optimal breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices for your children from birth up to 2 years of age - Check out the WHO pocket guide. It will reduce the risk of developing overweight and obesity and non-communicable diseases (cardiovascular diseases (such as heart attacks and stroke), cancers, chronic respiratory diseases (such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and asthma) and diabetes in adolescence and adulthood. Don't rely on word of mouth or myths – ensure you get information from the right sources on what your baby needs. The Dietary Guidelines for Indians by ICMR-National Institute of Nutrition (2024) and FSSAI's book titled 'Do you eat right?' are some good resources to explore for a healthier diet and a healthy you!

DO'S

Cook more at home: Prepare fresh meals using healthier cooking methods like steaming, baking, roasting, and grilling

Prepare meals ahead: Use your weekend to plan and prepare healthy meals. This will help avoid last-minute processed convenience foods without losing too much time or money.

Move and remain active! To know how much physical activity is recommended for what age group, check out the WHO Guideline on physical activity and sedentary behaviour. Play with your babies and young children to keep them active.

DONT'S

Don't consume fast/junk foods high in fat, salt and/or sugar like burgers, pizzas, cakes, biscuits, pies, samosa, patties, etc.

Don't forget that healthy eating begins with healthier shopping! As much as possible, avoid bringing ultra-processed food items into your kitchen and always prefer local, seasonal and fresh foods.

Don't fast (remain hungry) or feast (over-eat) – Try to eat regularly and reasonably.

Don't have meals while watching television, computers, or mobile.



Make healthier choices in food (Image:Freepik)

SIMPLE SWAPS FOR BETTER CHOICES

DO'S

Swap sugary drinks with natural homemade drinks: Replace sodas, flavoured juices, and energy drinks with low calorie beverages like herbal teas, coconut water, lemon water, homemade smoothies, etc. Choose whole fruits over juices.

Snack smarter to avoid artificial flavours, replace chips, candies, and packaged snacks with fresh fruits, roasted nuts, yogurt, and other food items containing whole ingredients.

Replace refined cereals and grains (like bread, washed legumes, polished rice) with foods high in fibre such as whole grains and pulses (wheat flour, bajra, ragi, bengal gram whole, green gram whole).

Swap industrial/ packaged food with a variety of local, fresh, and seasonal foods. Reviving local recipes is a good way to do this!

DONT'S

Don't miss opportunities to take a do-it-yourself approach: Avoid pre-packaged dressings, condiments, and sauces full of preservatives and sugar by making your own at home using fresh herbs, spices, and whole ingredients.

Use fewer frozen and canned foods: Choose fresh fruits and veggies without added preservatives over frozen or canned goods containing excess sodium, artificial additives, and unhealthy preservatives.

At snack time, substitute fried high fat/ sugary/ salty food with healthier choices like vegetable upma/poha, sprouts chaat, vegetable tikki, dhokla, etc.

Don't consume butter and animal fat in excessive amounts, Vanaspati is a complete no! Use healthy oils like mustard oil, rice bran oil, olive oil, or sesame oil for cooking.

(Disclaimer: The writer, Marie-Claude Desilets is the Chief, Nutrition UNICEF India. The views expressed in this article are the personal opinions of the author.)
