

OP-03-PHS

THE PROPORTION OF OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY AND ITS ASSOCIATION BETWEEN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND DIET AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN OF GRADES 6 TO 9 IN KALUTARA EDUCATIONAL ZONE

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.31705/FOMAAS.2024.3>

Background: The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies overweight and obesity as a global health crisis, linked to sedentary lifestyles and influenced by factors such as screen time and dietary choices. This study aimed to assess the proportion of overweight and obesity among grades 6 to 9 school students in the Kalutara educational zone, and its association with diet and physical activity.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted among school children of 6 to 9 grades using a multistage stratified cluster sampling technique in Type AB schools within the Kalutara educational zone, encompassing two out of four educational divisions. A total of 275 eligible students participated in the study, completing a self-administered questionnaire after parental consent. Weight and height measurements were manually recorded by investigators.

Results: Among the 275 participants, 17.8% (n=49) were classified as overweight or obese. Furthermore, a significant majority (75.27%, n=207) exhibited low levels of physical activity per week, with 20.8% (n=43) of these students falling into the overweight or obese category ($\chi^2=4.99$, df=1, p=0.025). Moreover, 64.72% (n=178) of students reported consuming an unhealthy diet per week, with 22.5% (n=40) of them being overweight or obese ($\chi^2=7.46$, df=1, p=0.006). Notably, a significantly higher proportion of male students (72.2%) compared to female students (56.5%) reported having unhealthy dietary habits ($X^2 = 7.44$, df = 1, p = 0.006). Additionally, older students demonstrated significantly lower physical activity levels compared to their younger counterparts (69.2% in Grades 6&7 vs. 79.7% in Grades 8&9; $X^2 = 3.99$, df = 1, p= 0.046).

Conclusion: The findings underscore the importance of prioritizing physical activity interventions, particularly among male students in grades 8 and 9. Implementing comprehensive nutrition education programs to cultivate healthy eating habits is imperative. Additionally, integrating health screenings can facilitate early detection of health issues among school children in Kalutara.

Key words: Overweight and Obesity, Diet, Physical activity, Schools, Kalutara