

Cartas científicas

Weight concerns and weight reduction practices of Portuguese adolescents

G. Marcelino^{1,2}, J. M. Oliveira³, P. Ravasco⁴ and P. Marques-Vidal^{1,5}

¹Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine. University of Lausanne. Lausanne. Switzerland. ²Faculdade de Medicina de Lisboa. Lisboa. Portugal. ³Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias. Lisboa. Portugal. ⁴Unidade de Nutrição e Metabolismo. Instituto de Medicina Molecular da Faculdade de Medicina da Universidade de Lisboa. Lisboa. Portugal. ⁵Cardiomet. Lausanne. Switzerland.

We assessed weight management practices in 266 boys and 312 girls (mean age 15.6 ± 1.3 years) from two schools in Lisbon. Body image was assessed using the method of Stunkard and participants were classified as desiring to lose weight if the ideal image was thinner than the current. Other data collected included measured height and weight, current smoking status, participation in extracurricular sports, the number of meals consumed the day before and meal skipping. No difference in the prevalence of overweight/obesity were found between genders (22.1% in girls and 19.5% in boys, $p > 0.05$). Conversely, willingness to lose weight was significantly higher in girls (48% vs 23% in boys, $p < 0.001$) and similar findings were observed after stratifying for BMI categories. Girls willing to lose weight smoked and skipped meals more frequently, whereas no differences were found for extracurricular sport activities. Boys willing to lose weight skipped meals more frequently and reported lower extracurricular sport activities, whereas no differences were found for smoking. Participants wishing to lose weight also reported a lower number of meals the day before. The highest prevalence of willingness to lose weight among girls might be related to media pressure that perpetuates the ideal of thinness and a negative stigma associated with being overweight in girls¹. Our results are also in agreement with a previous study suggesting that adolescents desiring to lose weight engage in several unhealthy behaviours such as meal skipping and smoking². Actually, meal skipping does not lead to weight loss³, and the increased smoking prevalence might be related to the widespread perception that smoking contributes to weight loss⁴. Still, of particular concern was the fact that participants wishing to lose weight actually tended to practice less sports, one of the major determinants of weight loss⁵. We conclude that weight reduction practices among Portuguese adolescents are inadequate and that educational measures are urgently needed in order to curb such unhealthy behaviours.

Correspondence: Pedro Marques-Vidal.
Institut Universitaire de Médecine Sociale et Préventive.
Rue du Bugnon, 17.
CH-1005 Lausanne, Switzerland.
E-mail: Pedro-Manuel.Marques-Vidal@chuv.ch

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Tabla I
Health behaviours according to willingness to lose weight, by gender

Willingness to lose weight	No	Yes	Test
Boys	N = 205	N = 60	
Smoking	13 (6.4)	3 (5.0)	0.15 ^{NS}
Extracurricular sport activities	145 (72.9)	31 (54.4)	7.04**
Meal skipping	65 (32.3)	30 (52.6)	7.86**
Number of meals consumed	4.2 ± 1.0	3.5 ± 0.9	4.48***
Girls	N = 162	N = 150	
Smoking	11 (7.0)	27 (18.0)	8.67**
Extracurricular sport activities	55 (36.7)	54 (38.0)	0.06 ^{NS}
Meal skipping	56 (35.9)	94 (63.5)	23.17***
Number of meals consumed	3.9 ± 0.9	3.5 ± 1.0	3.14**

Results are expressed as number of subjects and (percentage) and as mean ± standard deviation. Data was missing for some cases, so the percentages do not correspond exactly to the sample size. Statistical analysis by chi-square or Kruskal-Wallis test: ^{NS}: not significant; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

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