

# New program tackles growing problem of childhood obesity

Communities urged to focus on healthy lifestyles, eating habits

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Although British Columbia has a lower child obesity rate than the rest of Canada, the number of dangerously overweight children is on the increase, according to a government report.

Provincial health officer Dr. Perry Kendall said the number of obese children has doubled in the past 25 years, citing statistics from a report titled *Select Standing Committee on Health: A Strategy for Combating Childhood Obesity and Physical Inactivity in B.C.*

However, he noted this trend can be stopped if communities focus on prevention programs and encourage healthier lifestyles and eating habits.

A new program doing just that is SCOPE (Sustainable Childhood Obesity Prevention through Community Engagement), which began recently in Abbotsford and Prince George. The program has also launched a website, [www.scopebc.ca](http://www.scopebc.ca), providing information to British Columbians about preventing obesity and encouraging healthy choices.

Its guidelines follow a 5-2-

1-0 rule, which means children should eat five vegetables or fruits daily, spend no more than two hours in front of a screen, do at least one hour of active play and have zero sugar-sweetened drinks.

"SCOPE is a way to engage British Columbians in a more broader health initiative," said Kendall. "There's a tremendous role for municipalities to look at where unhealthy foods are marketed and sold and schools can certainly encourage healthy food choices and activities."

He said modern-day environments are causing children and youth to gain weight.

"Before you would have kids walking three miles to school or spending time outside playing but now they're being driven to school and stay indoors in front of the TV or on the computer," he said.

Prince George-Valemount MLA Shirley Bond said children today are more at risk of having shorter lives than any previous generation because of lifestyle choices and the growing problem of childhood obesity. One in four Canadian children are considered obese or dangerously overweight.

"It is imperative that we provide families with support and

resources and the SCOPE program does just that," she said.

The program began as a grassroots initiative under Child Health BC, which links the province's health authorities with BC Children's Hospital. SCOPE was granted \$300,000 for the three-year pilot program.

It was modelled after a similar program in Europe called EPODE, which encourages children to eat smart and play more, and has been successful in reducing diabetes rates.

In Canada, researchers have found that overweight children are at risk of developing health concerns like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, liver and kidney disease.

Dr. Shazhan Amed, a pediatric diabetes specialist and one of the creators of the SCOPE program, recently led a national study that looked at children with Type 2 diabetes. She said the study found 95 per cent of children with diabetes were obese.

"That tells us that obesity is the single most important factor [leading to diabetes] and it's completely preventable," she said.

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