



THE CHANGING DIETS OF SOUTH AFRICANS



As a nation that's seeing a rise in obesity and diet-related diseases, what has changed about the way we eat? And how can we get ourselves (and our kids) back on track?

Life in South Africa has changed dramatically since 1994, and so has the way we eat. Economic growth and rapid urbanisation have seen a major increase in access to fast food and processed food, and consequently our diets have suffered.

In addition, our increasingly busy lifestyles often lead us to seek convenience in the form of fast foods, while it leaves too little time to exercise and get outdoors.

Here's how to claim back your health in a modern, urban environment:

AVOID ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS

This group of foods includes fast food, savoury and sweet sacks such as biscuits, chips, pies and pastries. 'These foods are high in sugar and fat, and consequently high in kilojoules,' says Discovery Vitality dietitian Terry Harris. 'They provide energy, which can lead to weight gain if eaten in excess, but they don't provide beneficial nutrients.'

LIMIT LIQUID SUGAR

Globally, people are consuming more and more sugar-sweetened foods and drinks, which is associated with weight gain and chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease.

Sugary drinks, in particular, are a major contributor to high sugar intake. Sugary drinks (including 100% fruit juice) are a significant source of added sugar, but they don't make you feel full. Generally, people don't eat less to compensate for the extra kilojoules they drink.

Just one regular fizzy drink per day can contribute to significant weight gain. The average can of coldrink contains 39g of sugar, the equivalent of almost 8 teaspoons of sugar. If you drink one can of coldrink, or one fruit juice, every day for a year, that amounts to over 14kg of sugar per year. Although some of this sugar may be used for energy, it would require approximately 30 minutes of exercise every day to burn off one sugary drink.

EDUCATE OUR YOUTH

A 2016 study of more than 3 000 adolescents in Johannesburg and Soweto found that a large portion of this population consume fast food meals on most days.

This age is when individualised behaviours develop and therefore represents a window of opportunity for creating awareness. Advertising and education in schools – and at home – can help our young people manage their weight and ultimately lead healthier lifestyles.



GET TO GRIPS WITH FOOD LABELS

During a [2015 study](#) published by the South African Journal of Science, it was found that some of the largest shifts in food consumption were observed for sauces, dressings and condiments.

Read and [understand food labels](#) when buying condiments and sauces – in many, the sugar content can be high.

EXERCISE REGULARLY

A [report](#) published by the US National Institutes of Health states that, while our environment plays a big part in what and how much exercise we do, parents are important role models when it comes to physical activity in children and adolescents.

Positive reinforcement, parental participation and time spent outdoors go a long way to getting kids moving and boosting their fitness levels. So let's take our kids out, ride bikes, climb trees and make use of our neighbourhood recreational facilities.

TEACH THEM YOUNG

Discovery Vitality dietician Terry Harris gives her top tips on how to get our kids eating healthily:

- Offer plain water or milk rather than fruit juice or soft drinks.
- Gradually reduce the sugar in their cereal and tea by a quarter of a teaspoon until they no longer need it.
- Buy cereals and meals with 5g of sugar or less, per serving. Sticking to whole grain cereals such as All Bran Flakes or oats will also keep your children fuller for longer.
- Encourage your kids to help prepare supper and talk to them about the importance of a healthy diet.

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