What baby fat?

Don't worry if your kid appears overweight. With an active lifestyle, many children end up losing those kilos

PHOTO: COURTESY OF AISHAH HAROON

"For some reason, Fatimah appears bigger than her sister. She was also heavier at birth. She eats a lot, unlike Khadijah, who is very picky with her food."

AISHAH HAROON on her 2½-year-old daughter Fatimah (left), who is bigger in size than her elder daughter, 3½-year-old Khadijah

Nicholas Yong

Babies are usually not classified as obese. Instead, they are either large, a good size, small for their gestational age, or weeks of pregnancy.

Paediatricians whom LifeStyle spoke to said children up to one year old are simply too young to be classified as obese.

The issue of when the size of a large baby becomes a concern was raised by a recent case in the United States where a baby was initially denied health insurance for being overweight. Four-month-old Alex Lange tipped the scales at 7.7kg, falling into the 99th growth percentile for babies his age. But he was still declared healthy by doctors.

Associate Professor Lee Yung Seng, senior consultant at the University Children's Medical Institute at National University Hospital, said: "It's quite ridiculous to call a baby obese. The term has negative connotations and we don't want to cause parents undue worry. Generally, we are more confident about assessing any potential weight issues when a child has reached one year of age."

Associate Professor Mary Daniel, head of the Neonatal Ambulatory Service at KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) said: "Babies who have poor growth before delivery and born with low birth weights often have rapid catch-up weight gain in infancy."

Infants are never put on any restrictive diet, regardless of their weight. "There is no such thing as low-fat milk for babies. They need nutrients to grow," said Dr Ang Ai Tin, consultant paediatrician and neonatologist at Thomson Medical Centre.

She added that for large children up to two years of age, they could go on to shed excess weight "because they are very active and constantly running around".

Public relations manager Karen Lai, 33, is the mother of two children aged two and four, who are "perfectly healthy and fine and extremely active".

"A few years ago, everyone thought my son Bijan was chubby and they were always pinching him. But the doctors never said it was a cause for concern and he is leaner now," she said.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF KAREN LAI

Karen Lai's son Bijan at one year old (above). Now at four years old (below), he looks much leaner, says his mother.

Nevertheless, some go on to develop weight issues as toddlers between the ages of 12 and 24 months. Parents can monitor their children's growth by the act of what doctors call "eyeballing".

This is done by comparing their children to others of the same age to see if they are noticeably bigger. And even if they are so, they are not necessarily overweight.

From an early age, 32-year-old Aishah Haroon's daughter Fatimah was often mistaken for the elder of her two daughters.

Now at 2½ years old, Fatimah is 2kg heavier than her sister Khadijah, who is a year older.

"Fatimah eats a lot but doctors say her weight is at a healthy level," said Ms Aishah, who works in advertising.

Obesity tends to be detected only from primary school onwards as there is no formal screening programme before that. As such, doctors advise parents to update their child's growth charts, marking down their height, weight and head circumference. The growth chart helps doctors monitor a child's growth in relation to other children his age, in order to determine which growth percentile the child falls into.

While there is no standard definition of childhood obesity applied worldwide, overweight is often defined as a Body Mass Index (BMI) of between the 85th and 95th percentile. Anything above the 95th percentile is considered obesity.

A child may also be genetically predisposed to weight gain, although in rare cases it may be due to medical problems such as a hormonal imbalance.

"If one parent is obese, the risk of obesity in adulthood is three times higher. If both are obese, the risk increases to 10 times," said Prof Daniel.

In most cases, the problem is due to the child's diet. As such, it is necessary to ensure that the child is eating a variety of foods in the right proportions. The eating habits of parents are also examined, as bad eating habits tend to run in the family.

Prof Lee stressed: "We emphasise healthy eating for children rather than put them on a restrictive diet as they still need nutrients to grow." The objective, he added, is to slow down the weight gain rather than to lose weight.

For overweight children, he recommends cutting down on deep-fried food such as French fries, as well as carbohydrates and sweet things such as soft drinks and cakes. Other doctors add that fruit and vegetables are an integral part of the diet.

Prof Lee also encourages them to lead a physically active lifestyle. He warned: "Many overweight toddlers tend to become overweight children and then overweight adults."

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Study on growing up

On Thursday, the National University Health System, KK Women's and Children's Hospital and Singapore Institute for Clinical Sciences will launch a multi-ethnic cohort study of mothers and babies. Growing Up In Singapore Towards Healthy Outcomes (Gusto) seeks to provide insight into the precursors for metabolic diseases such as diabetes and obesity.
Where: 13 Auditorium, 13 Building, National University of Singapore
When: Thursday, 10am to 12.40pm
Registration: Call Doreen Ng on 6516-4079 or e-mail Doreen_ng@ nuhs.edu.sg
Info: Go to www.nuhs.edu.sg