

## **Promoting healthy eating and physical activity among school children: findings from Health-E-PALS, the first pilot intervention from Lebanon**

Childhood obesity rates are growing throughout the Middle East. Epidemiologists report a high percentage of Lebanese children who engage in unhealthy eating behaviours and do not meet exercise guidelines. While a great deal of research on obesity interventions has been done in other parts of the world, comparatively little has been done to adapt or create acceptable interventions for use in the Middle East. This study intended “to evaluate the feasibility and effectiveness of a multi-component school-based intervention to promote healthy eating and physical activity (and prevent obesity) with school children aged 9–11 years in Lebanon.” This study used a sample size of 387 fourth and fifth grade children from eight matched schools. The intervention consisted of “12 culturally appropriate classroom sessions using fun and interactive activities were delivered once a week for 3 consecutive months,” “a family programme consisting of meetings, health fairs as well as information packets was sent home along with some food samples and recipes” and “a food service intervention targeting the school shops and the lunch boxes sent by the family.” Overall, the intervention “demonstrated the feasibility of undertaking a successful school-based intervention despite the many contextual challenges that may be faced in a politically unstable context”. It also focused on providing a culturally sensitive intervention to improve acceptability and sustainability. The intervention group was found to be more self-efficacious than the control, which is an important mitigator of obesity. Additionally, they tended to eat breakfast more often and consume fewer soft drinks. The physical activity component of the intervention was less successful, which is consistent with previous studies, as students may not have the time or a safe environment to exercise outside school. Because the study was only 12-weeks long, BMI did not change significantly over the course of the study. Limitations included “relatively short study duration, [...] failure to succeed in modifying the school’s food environment due to lobbying and lack of support of some of the school authorities... [and] extra sessions [...] necessary to make up for the missed ones that were cancelled due to unpredicted strikes and security events.

Reference: Habib-Mourad C, Ghandour LA, Moore HJ, et al. Promoting healthy eating and physical activity among school children: findings from Health-E-PALS, the first pilot intervention from Lebanon. *BMC Public Health*. 2014;14:940. Published 2014 Sep 10. doi:10.1186/1471-2458-14-940