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EXPLORING FOOD AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY BEHAVIOURS OF ADOLESCENTS AFTER BARIATRIC SURGERY: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

Baraa Osama Alries

Faculty Advisor

Prof. Habiba Ali, Department of Nutrition and Health
College of Medicine & Health Sciences

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Abstract

Introduction: In recent years, both globally and in the United Arab Emirates, adolescent obesity has emerged as a serious public health concern. Bariatric surgery is a viable treatment for adolescent obesity. However, an equally important aspect lies in examining the changes in lifestyle, specifically pertaining to dietary habits and physical activity after this surgical intervention. Moreover, there is limited research on the postoperative nutrition-related dietary and physical activity behaviors of adolescents after bariatric surgery globally, regionally, and in the UAE. **Aims:** The main aim of this study was to explore barriers and facilitators of diet and physical activity regimens of adolescents who had undergone bariatric surgery. **Method:** In this qualitative study, in-depth individual interviews were conducted with 15 adolescents aged 12-19 years old who had undergone bariatric surgery at least one year prior to the study at Danat Al Emarat Hospital in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The Social-Ecological Model (SEM) was used to guide data collection and interpretation of the results. The SEM is particularly insightful as it acknowledges that behavioral changes can be shaped by factors within an individual's sphere as well as their social environment. **Results:** In this study, 15 participants were interviewed with an average age of 17.6 ± 1.75 years. Sleeve gastrectomy was the most common surgical procedure, accounting for 86.6% of all surgeries performed on the adolescent participants. The study identified five key themes from the interviews with the participants. These themes were related to various aspects of their experiences after the surgery. The barriers to regular exercise primarily revolved around family and academic responsibilities. Moreover, environmental, psychological, and medical factors acted as barriers, with issues related to access to suitable exercise facilities being a common concern. Interestingly, most participants did not consider food or physical activity as their primary post-surgery challenges. Instead, they highlighted other issues, such as health-related challenges and a lack of energy. Participants stressed the critical role played by their healthcare teams in offering support and assistance to overcome these challenges. They acknowledged that their medical conditions, such as type 2 diabetes and hypothyroidism, served as internal motivators for pursuing bariatric surgery. Adapting to post-surgery lifestyle changes was a significant focus. Participants employed various strategies, mainly relying on self-support methods. These strategies included making healthier food choices, reducing food intake, adhering to medication regimens, and managing dietary habits more effectively. Regular physical activity was also recognized as being essential in attaining and sustaining the weight lost after the surgery. Participants believed that the existing healthcare team, including doctors, dietitians, and nurses, was well-equipped to support adolescents on their weight loss journey post-surgery. Moreover, the study identified two subthemes for supporting teenagers in overcoming challenges related to food, exercise, and weight post-bariatric surgery. These subthemes were seeking support from the healthcare team and developing self-management skills. Participants stressed the importance of following instructions from healthcare professionals, particularly consultants, and dietitians, who played a crucial role in guiding their dietary choices and habits post-surgery. **Conclusions:** The themes that emerged from this study provided insight into the nutritional and physical activity habits of adolescents, as well as the associated facilitators and barriers. These findings can contribute to providing appropriate post-operative care adapted to the cultural and social norms in the UAE. While the adolescents in the study achieved weight loss and adopted healthier eating habits, they faced challenges in maintaining regular exercise due to academic commitments. Nevertheless, they emphasized the importance of healthcare teams in providing guidance and support, especially in managing dietary changes and exercise routines following surgery.

Keywords: Adolescents, obesity, bariatric surgery, interviews, socio-ecological model, diet, physical activity, body mass index