

Carta Editor / Letter to the Editor

Law that promotes 15-minutes of daily physical activity: How does it affect sedentary behavior and eating habits of schoolchildren?

Ley que promueve los 15 minutos de actividad física diaria: ¿Cómo afecta la conducta sedentaria y los hábitos alimentarios de los escolares?

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Dear Editor

On Tuesday, March 3rd of this year, the Cámara de Diputados de Chile approved the bill that seeks to require 15 minutes of daily practice of physical activity at the beginning of the school day in educational establishments. The aim of the initiative is to encourage schoolchildren to practice physical activity and healthy habits. If it becomes law, the measure will be implemented in all types of educational establishments (public, charter and private schools) and educational levels (preschool, elementary and high school). This is excellent news for a country with increasing rates of overweight and obesity in childhood, reaching 50%¹. In this epidemiological scenario, it should be noted that obesity is a multifactorial disease which involves environmental aspects in its etiology. This includes the lifestyles of modern society characterized by inadequate eating habits and high

sedentary behavior, which increase the risk of suffering from non-communicable diseases (NCD)².

In this context, it is necessary to consider that educational establishments are conducive environments for the installation of healthy lifestyles (i.e., healthy eating habits, regular physical activity, self-care), due to being spaces of intense social interaction that aim to educate, as reported by the findings of Casu et al.³ The actions carried out in the school environment allow the formation of new habits, but it is also up to the educational establishments provide an environment in which food education is favored, introducing healthy eating habits from childhood⁴. Consequently, the modification to the Sports Law No. 19,712 in Chile, in terms of establishing that "The educational establishments of the country, at the levels of preschool, primary and secondary school, must perform fifteen minutes of daily exercise before

the start of the school day, in order to encourage sports and healthy lifestyles" (Law No. 19,712, article 5) will be an advance. However, this advance must go hand in hand with a systemic strategy that is oriented to change and re-signify the healthier eating behaviors of schoolchildren, incorporating nutritional education content in educational establishments through professionals who can participate through, at least, elective subjects.

Healthy eating habits are a basic requirement for the promotion and protection of health status, due to, among other reasons, that they allow for human growth and development with a good quality of life⁵. To do this, the best schools create healthy lifestyles, determine the nutritional profile and establish age-appropriate diets⁶. There is scientific evidence that reports that learning during this period has repercussions on behavior in many aspects of future life; consequently, early education in eating habits delivered by specialists in the school context is required. On the other hand, excess consumption of ultra-processed foods leads to a higher intake of sodium, fat and sugar, and there is a direct relationship with the increase in obesity and other NCD⁷.

During the school period that corresponds to the age range between 6 and 17 years, children and youth have a higher energy expenditure due to development and, therefore, require physical activity to stimulate their normal development and growth. However, it is also at this stage that schoolchildren may exhibit unhealthy sedentary behavior, (e.g., screen time, sitting for long periods, and choosing leisure activities that are physically inactive)^{3,6,8}. This is one of the aspects to be addressed with the implementation of 15 minutes of daily physical activity in the school environment, as regular physical activity can mitigate the negative effects of various diseases, which translates into important benefits⁵. The benefits of increasing the practice of physical activity are associated with a decrease in obesity, reduction in cardiometabolic risk, lower resting heart rate, greater bone mineralization and a decrease in the risk of suffering from osteoporosis in adulthood, better maturation of the motor nervous system and increased motor skills, in addition to better academic performance and sociability⁸.

On the other hand, and considering that the normal growth of children and youth requires a diet that provides enough energy and nutrients for their physical, social and cognitive development. Children and youths who do not eat properly have a high risk of presenting growth retardation, poor academic performance, difficulties in social participation, iron deficiency anemia and increased chances of developing NCD in adulthood⁹. In this regard the literature reports that the implementation of physical exercise breaks in school, has the potential to reduce the prevalence of physically inactive youth and therefore, policies supporting increased physical activity time improves the health of students in the school setting^{10,11,12,13}.

In a context of growing complexity, in terms of the health of the schoolchildren, it is necessary for the State to deploy a robust repertoire of strategies that allow lowering the rates of overweight and obesity in the population, such as the legislative decision to incorporate the 15 minutes of physical activity in educational establishments. However, complementary actions should be considered, such as the inclusion of content on healthy eating habits, eliminating as much as possible the consumption of processed and ultra-processed foods by children, modifying dietary patterns and sedentary lifestyles. Thus, actions aimed at educating about healthy eating are important.

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