

Family-based counselling increases physical activity and improves diet quality in children

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A recent Finnish study showed that individualised and family-based lifestyle counselling helps 6-8-year-old children increase their physical activity levels and improve their diet quality during a two-year follow-up. The results of the study conducted at the University of Eastern Finland were recently published in *Preventive Medicine*.

"Children from families who participated in [lifestyle](#) counselling were physically more active, ate more vegetables and vegetable-oil-based spreads and had a higher intake of important nutrients than [children](#) in the control group. However, the impact of the intervention on screen time remained modest," says Anna Viitasalo, MD, PhD, from the University of Eastern Finland.

The researchers investigated the effects of physical activity and dietary counselling on physical activity, sedentary behaviour and diet quality during a two-year period in over 500 children aged 6–8 years, as part of the Physical Activity and Nutrition in Children (PANIC) Study.

The study showed that children from families who received lifestyle counselling particularly increased their leisure-time physical activity, while it decreased in the control group. Screen-based sedentary behaviour, such as watching TV and playing computer games, increased in both groups, but less in the [intervention group](#) compared to the [control group](#).

The researchers also found that lifestyle counselling increased the

consumption of vegetables, low-fat milk and vegetable oil-based spreads in children. The health-promoting changes in diet quality also increased the intake of fibre and vitamins C and E.

Parents' role is crucial

"Parents have a major impact on their children's health behaviour. Individualised lifestyle counselling involving parents could be part of the child health care system. Reducing the risk of many non-communicable diseases by improved lifestyle habits could also reduce health care costs," states the Principal Investigator, Professor Timo Lakka.

During the two-year follow-up, the families in the intervention group participated in six physical activity and dietary counselling sessions which aimed to find suitable and practical ways to increase physical activity, reduce sedentary behaviour, and improve diet quality in each family. Children in the intervention group could also participate in exercise clubs organised by the study. The children's [physical activity](#), screen-based sedentary behaviour and [diet quality](#) were assessed at baseline and at two-year follow-up.

The PANIC Study is an ongoing lifestyle intervention study at the Institute of Biomedicine of the University of Eastern Finland. The PANIC Study produces scientifically valuable information on children's lifestyle, health and well-being.

More information: Viitasalo A, ym. The effects of a 2-year individualized and family-based lifestyle intervention on physical activity, sedentary behavior and diet in children. *Preventive Medicine* 2016;87:81–88. Full text available at: authors.elsevier.com/a/1SdzeKt2pinCa

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