

Fighting fat: with TAF in Singapore

☒ Warren Lee

In 1992, the Singapore government noted that the obesity prevalence (defined in this case as a weight above 120% of the ideal weight for a given height for the appropriate sex) among schoolchildren was 14%. Singapore's population has a relatively high prevalence of diabetes, at 9.2%. Rates of obesity and overweight are high – 6% of the adult population has a body mass index (BMI) of more than 30 kg/m², and around 25% have a BMI above 25 kg/m². Recent years have also seen the increasing appearance of young onset Type 2 diabetes and impaired glucose tolerance (IGT). Most of these affected children are obese. In an effort to reduce childhood obesity and, hopefully, the risk of adult obesity, the Trim and Fit (TAF) scheme was introduced. The scheme aims to improve physical fitness and reduce levels of overweight among schoolchildren. In 2002, this successful programme reduced the rate of obesity among schoolchildren to 9.8%.



TAF targeting

The TAF programme in schools targets all students from primary to pre-university levels. It aims to help students acquire habits of healthy eating and exercise, and pursue a healthy lifestyle through proper

nutrition and regular exercise. The general student population is engaged in school-wide events such as fun runs and mass aerobic workouts.

Overweight students participate in 1½ hours of physical activity per

week, in addition to their weekly physical education sessions. Some schools let children play games, others help them learn a sport. The idea is to make losing weight through increased physical activity as enjoyable as possible. Some schools organize the activities during recess, while others set time aside before or after school. Schools also work closely with parents, and the scheme has a website^{1,2} which provides parents with more information and practical tips.

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The government has published guidelines on the types of healthy foods and drinks that may be sold in school shops. Also, in an effort to encourage students to drink more water, water-coolers have been installed in schools in Singapore.

TAF outcomes

Since the implementation of the TAF programme in 1992, the percentage >>



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of students passing the Singapore government's National Award for Physical Fitness (NAPFA) test went up from 58% in 1992 to 82% in 2002. A yearly ranking system tracks the success of individual schools' efforts to reduce obesity and increase fitness levels among their students.

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Trim and Fit (TAF)

The Trim and Fit (TAF) programme was launched in conjunction with the National Healthy Lifestyle Campaign in 1992. Its aims are to:

- ♦ encourage schools to develop strategies to reduce obesity and improve physical fitness of the student population
- ♦ provide incentives for students to keep physically fit

Plan and conduct: TAF remediation programme for pupils in target group

The programme may include the following:

- ♦ counselling pupils on nutrition
- ♦ physical activities (walking/jogging, aerobics/calisthenics, modified sports and games, skipping, weight training, circuit training, swimming, hiking and/or camping)

Success factors

- ♦ leadership of school principal
- ♦ inspiration from educators
- ♦ cooperation from tuckshop vendors
- ♦ involvement of parents

TAF helps you to:

- ♦ feel more confident, increase self-esteem, and look better
- ♦ experience fewer medical problems
- ♦ improve blood pressure and cholesterol levels
- ♦ reduce anxiety and stress
- ♦ control weight
- ♦ build healthy bones and muscles
- ♦ be more alert and study better
- ♦ improve strength and endurance

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Extremely fat children (those more than 160% above the ideal weight for their height) are referred to the Health Promotion Board (HPB) which provides medical screening and nutrition counselling. The HPB also helps develop realistic growth norms, and equips teachers with the knowledge and skills necessary to implement an effective TAF programme in schools. Children at high risk for medical problems are in turn referred to paediatric departments in hospitals for further investigation and treatment.

Warren Lee

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References

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