

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Motivations of overweight adolescents participating in a multidisciplinary health promotion program

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** the perception of individuals about their own health is a strong indicator of their real state, as well as their behaviors related to the prognosis in case of presence of pathologies, besides being proportional to their motivations to acquire healthy habits.

**Objective:** to describe the motivations of overweight adolescents when participating in a multidisciplinary health promotion program and their perceptions about habits related to physical and emotional well-being.

**Methods:** this is a qualitative study, using the Bardin content analysis technique. The tool used for data collection was the semi-structured interview, analyzed with the help of the software QSR NVivo 11 through grouping of the speech into clusters. These in turn were evaluated in three categories: (1) motivation; (2) food; and (3) physical exercise.

**Results:** the average age of the participants was  $13.8 \pm 2.4$ , with an average body mass index of  $31.8 \pm 8.5 \text{ kg/m}^2$ . Regarding family income, 41.66% had monthly income of 3 to 6 minimum wages. Regarding the educational level of parents, 70.83% of mothers had completed higher education, while 29.16% had completed high school. According to the respondents' answers, the greatest motivation to participate in a multidisciplinary obesity treatment program was weight loss. In category 2, it was observed that adolescents associated the act of eating with feelings such as anxiety and nervousness. In category 3, the impact of the pandemic was found under the modalities of physical exercise practiced.

**Conclusion:** the results prove the importance of understanding the perception of adolescents about their own health and related habits, in order to elaborate effective strategies for health promotion and consequent improvement of the quality of life of these individuals.

**Keywords:** adolescent behavior, health behavior, patient care team, qualitative research.

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## Authors summary

### Why was this study done?

To describe the motivations of overweight adolescents when participating in a multidisciplinary health promotion project. In addition, it is intended to consider the possible effects of the pandemic on eating habits and physical activity in individuals of this age group.

### What did the researchers do and find?

The researchers conducted a qualitative, descriptive study, using Bardin's content analysis for the construction of thematic categories. It was identified that the motivations of the subjects to participate in the program, focused on the possibility of weight loss, which is a limited perception of health. However, the final interviews indicated that the interventions were effective to expand the concept of health of the participants.

### What do these findings mean?

The findings mean that it is important to understand adolescents' perceptions of their own health and related habits in order to develop effective strategies focused on the prevention and treatment of obesity through health promotion.

## INTRODUCTION

Obesity in adolescence has been interpreted as one of the major public health challenges in the XXI<sup>1</sup> century due to the phase being marked by different biological, cognitive, emotional and social transformations, being characterized by the transition from childhood to adulthood<sup>2</sup>. Having said that, strategies to prevent overweight and obesity, as well as treatment become even more complex, because the cycle is marked by the need for autonomy and independence in daily activities, responsibility for one's own health, adherence to new habits and behavior<sup>3,4</sup>. In order to guide actions aimed at reducing obesity rates, it is necessary to understand the etiology and pathogenesis of the disease, which in turn is a multifactorial disorder with prevalence attributed to various biopsychosocial processes, beyond the influence of the environment in which the individual live<sup>5,6</sup>. Factors such as genetic predisposition, psychological disorders, physical inactivity and inadequate feeding<sup>7</sup> are related to excessive weight gain in early life, which in turn are associated with social discrimination, behavior and learning problems, and negative self-image that persists in adult life<sup>8</sup>.

Since March 2020, the world is facing the largest pandemic in history and the first in the globalized world<sup>9</sup>, the Coronavirus (COVID-19). In this context, research is unanimous in showing that children and adolescents are more likely to develop psychiatric disorders resulting from the pandemic and social isolation established as a measure to contain the contagion by the Sars-CoV-2<sup>10,11</sup> virus. During social isolation, individuals in this age group are less exposed to the sun and practice less physical activity<sup>12</sup>, which is associated with negative states of emotion. At the same time, they consume more social media, which is also associated with negative states of mood<sup>13</sup>.

The literature presents multiprofessional interventions - physical exercise, nutritional education and psychotherapy - as an effective standard procedure for directing changes in behavior that result in a healthier lifestyle<sup>14,15</sup>. The indicated interventions involve multicomponent behavioral approaches, through the participation of professionals in medicine, nutrition, physical education, psychology, physiotherapy and biomedicina<sup>16</sup>.

Regarding these multiprofessional programs, the study by Silva and co-workers<sup>17</sup> states that, because they believe that interventions could lead to weight loss, participants develop many expectations regarding dietary

changes and lifestyle habits, to understand and validate the importance of having a nutritionally adequate diet and a physically active life. In addition, the same study showed that participants changed the initial perception of health at the end of the program, considering the concept more broadly, reporting improvement in sleep quality, activities and increase in social coexistence.

Given the above, this study aims to describe the motivations of overweight adolescents to participate in a multidisciplinary health promotion project and assess the relationship of these expectations with the perception of their own health. In addition, it is intended to consider the possible effects of the pandemic on eating habits and physical activity in individuals of this age group.

## METHODS

### Study Design

This is a qualitative, descriptive study, using the content analysis of Bardin<sup>18</sup> for the construction of thematic categories. The three stages of the content analysis were observed: (1) pre-analysis, which consisted in the elaboration of initial ideas and creation of categories of analysis; (2) interpretation of the collected material and construction of the exploration categories; (3) data processing and construction of results.

### Study Location and Period

Research conducted from March to July 2021 in a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the interior of Paraná.

### Study Population and Eligibility Criteria

Sample composed of 24 adolescents with overweight or obesity verified through the cutoff points proposed by Cole & Lobstein<sup>19</sup>.

The inclusion criterion covered participation in a multidisciplinary health promotion program of 12 weeks conducted by a team containing nutritionists, physical education professionals, psychologists and physiotherapists. The sample was selected for convenience.

### Data Collection

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews, containing the following guiding questions: 1) What do you expect when participating in the program? 2) How is your relationship with food? 3) Do you like

physical activity? Practice? Which? - conducted from March to July 2021. Participants were invited to answer the interview in person at two times (before and after the 12-week intervention period).

Participants performed the interventions three times a week for 12 weeks guided by a team of physical education, nutrition and psychology professionals. Physical exercise was performed 3x per week for 1 hour per day and organized in aerobic and anaerobic exercises; theoretical and practical classes related to nutritional education and psychotherapy were performed 1x per week each for 20 minutes. Nutritional education interventions were carried out in groups, through an approach focused on awareness and change of eating behavior. The themes are based on the Food Guide for the Brazilian Population<sup>20</sup>.

Weekly meetings were held with theoretical-practical activities, using materials and dynamics possible to be performed in the time and space available. Topics such as: application of the 24-hour recall; guidance for filling out the 3-day food record; 10 steps of the Food Guide and healthy dish; adequacy of macro and micronutrients; adequate and balanced diet; level of food processing; guidance on home measures; food preparation and meal frequency; eating behavior; reading labels; myths and truths about ultra-processed foods; techniques to maintain healthy eating after the program. It is worth mentioning that the interventions are always conducted in order to guide a balanced diet, thus, no type of diet was prescribed to adolescents.

On the other hand, psychoeducation interventions were performed in the approach of operative groups<sup>21</sup> and took place through theoretical-practical and dynamic activities aimed at the interaction of participants. The themes of the interventions were defined from the initial meetings, facing the reality and the needs of the group, using as support the values and principles of the National Health Promotion Policy (PNPS)<sup>22</sup>. In this way, the individual subject will be considered in the collective subject, taking into account each historical, political, social and familiar<sup>23,21</sup>. The weekly meetings were conducted based on topics such as: objective and functioning of interventions; understanding the body; true weight loss; establishing short, medium and long-term goals; health as a criterion for choices (exemplifying what it is to “lose weight” in an unhealthy way and what the consequences are); the importance of learning to enjoy the process; behavioral tasks for the week; self-esteem and self-confidence; standards of beauty and healthy beauty; bullying; healthy habits in improving psychic and emotional states; creating fun and healthy rituals; how to share project learning with family and friends; time management itself and healthy leisure choices; analysis of goals and the changes obtained from various aspects; self-comparison; persisting with healthy habits for life.

The physical exercises were conducted in the form of circuit, with emphasis on large muscle groups. Thus, the sessions were divided into A/B training and performed alternately, with emphasis on localized muscle groups, strength work and muscular endurance, flexibility and cardiorespiratory endurance.

## Data Analysis

The data obtained in the transcription of the interviews were analyzed with the help of the software QSR NVivo 11, Windows version, using the technique of content analysis of Bardin<sup>18</sup>. The program used allowed us to store interviews, cross-check information, encode data and manage analysis, and assist in the assembly of thematic categories. In addition, it also enabled the basic statistical analysis and grouping of speech into clusters, trees and word frequencies.

## Ethical and Legal Aspects of the Research

The interviews were recorded and transcribed in their entirety with the authorization of the participants. All subjects were informed of the study procedures, the possible risks and benefits, agreed to participate and signed the Informed Consent Form (ICF) and the Consent Form (CF).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to compare, through qualitative methods of analysis, the perception of adolescents about their own health and before and after 12 weeks of multidisciplinary interventions carried out in a Multidisciplinary Health Promotion Program.

Regarding the characterization of the interviewed subjects, the average age was 13.8 years, 62.5% of the female adolescents and 37.5% of the male ones. The average Body Mass Index of the participants was 31.8 kg/m<sup>2</sup>. Regarding family income, 29.16% had monthly income of one to three minimum wages, 41.66% had monthly income of 3 to 6 minimum wages and 29.18% had monthly income greater than 6 minimum wages. Regarding the educational level of parents, 70.83% of mothers had completed higher education, while 29.16% had completed high school.

The characteristic of the socioeconomic level found in the sample confirms a data already established in the literature on overweight in adolescents being more frequent in families with better socioeconomic conditions in developing countries<sup>24</sup>. However, the heterogeneity of the sample in relation to this aspect supports that, in Brazil, this growth occurs in all socioeconomic strata, including among families with lower purchasing power<sup>25</sup>. Regarding the parents' schooling, we observed a significant majority of mothers with complete higher education, corroborating with the study of Guedes and collaborators<sup>26</sup>, in which it was observed that children are three times more likely to develop overweight/ obesity when parents have higher education.

Based on the similarities found in transcription and other contents during the analysis process, the following categories emerged: (1) motivation; (2) food; and (3) physical activity. The results were presented through word clouds, in which we can observe the frequency of certain terms in the discourse of the participants and their associations. The size of the word in the figure accuses its representativeness. In the case of category 1 (motivation), there was a higher frequency and representativeness of the word “slim” both before and after the intervention period. To a lesser extent, the word “health” also appears in both moments.



**Figure 1:** Word clouds related to category 1 (motivation).

The above result shows that the subjects had as main motivation to participate in the multidisciplinary program, weight loss. The lower representativeness of the word “health” is justified by adolescents limiting health to thinness, which is a distorted definition possibly supported by a low degree of health literacy<sup>27</sup>. This, in turn, is a worrying factor because according to Berkman and collaborations<sup>28</sup>, the degree of health literacy is a strong indicator of the real state of health of the individual. Because they are overweight or obese adolescents, the fact of overvaluing weight loss as the main indicator of health suggests a certain psychological vulnerability of these individuals, since excess fat results in low self-esteem, high body dissatisfaction and behavioral disorders<sup>29</sup>.

In turn, at the time post intervention, the word “slim” is accompanied by words such as “learned”, “keep”, “change” and the verb “lost” now appears in the past (figure 1), interventions were effective to broaden the concept of health and self-perception of participants. In addition, it was possible to conclude that, although this is not the initial motivation, adolescents realized the need to adopt the good habits they learned in the interventions, so as to be physically and mentally healthy, broadly and not only according to the simplistic definition of the absence of disease.

Regarding category 2 (food), the word cloud referring to the pre-intervention moment, manifested with greater representativeness the word “eat”, associated with words such as “like”, “anxiety”, “nervous”, “exaggeration” and “crisis” (figure 2). The result revealed at the time pre-intervention indicates that despite enjoying eating, for adolescents the act was associated with feelings such as

anxiety and nervousness, and may be the cause of crises and exaggerations at the time of the meal. This sequence of events is connected by the fact that food is seen as gratification or as a form of compensation and numbness of emotions<sup>30</sup>.

Still in the pre-intervention moment, it was possible to identify less representative words such as “time”, “moment” and “ran” that were used to portray how meals are made at home, a situation in which many reported factors such as lack of time and excessive dedication to work by parents. In previous studies, this reality was motivating the increase in the consumption of nutritionally inadequate foods and the omission of the main meals, because the parents presented a more negligent posture with food issues<sup>31,32</sup>.

While in the post-intervention period (figure 2), the words: “changed”, “healthy”, “learned” and “exception”, suggesting that adolescents acquired theoretical and practical knowledge about the theme during the project, which demonstrated the effectiveness of nutritional education and psychotherapy strategies in changing behavior in relation to alimentation<sup>33</sup>. The study by Silva, Frazão, Osório and Vasconcelos<sup>34</sup> concluded that adolescents’ adherence to healthy eating is associated with liking some healthy foods, having access to and availability of these foods, being afraid of becoming fat, receive encouragement from the media and the family environment, as well as from school through educational feeding practices, thus confirming the importance of programs aimed at nutritional education in this age group (Figure 3).





**Figure 2:** Word clouds related to category 2 (food).

Finally, the analysis of category 3 (physical exercise), show that at the time before the interventions, the words with greater representation were “make” and “like”, individuals with the practice of physical activity. However, there is a highlight for some modalities such as “walk”, “soccer”, “swimming”, “run”, “gyn”, “basketball” and “dance”, activities and/or practiced in community environments. Due to the social isolation imposed by the COVID-19<sup>11</sup> pandemic, such activities had to be paralyzed, which may explain the increase in body weight in adolescents during the period<sup>35</sup> and the replacement of

these words by other modalities such as “walk”, “bike”, and “treadmill” at the time after intervention.

These in turn are activities practiced individually, without the need for greater interactions and in environments with greater privacy such as inside the house, in the yard and on the street. The above mentioned picture, together with the expressive representation of the word “pandemic” in the post-intervention moment, highlights the reflection of the period of social isolation experienced by the COVID-19 pandemic, in which individual modalities and tele exercise<sup>36</sup> were encouraged.



**Figure 3:** Word clouds related to category 3 (physical exercise).

The research conducted by Carneiro, Medeiros and Silva<sup>37</sup> reinforces the results found in this study, highlighting that actions developed in an interdisciplinary project aimed at obesity can lead to a significant experience in health promotion, behaviours in relation to unhealthy habits. In addition, intervention programs can support the public and private health system in the management of obesity, minimizing expenditure in the sector resulting from the treatment of obesity and associated comorbidities<sup>38,16,33</sup>.

Despite the School Health Program (PSE)<sup>39</sup> to encourage the integral training of students through actions of health promotion, disease prevention and health care of children, adolescents and there are difficulties in the execution of interventions for this purpose in school environments, such as lack of material and human resources, and lack of training for the professions<sup>40,41</sup>. The above-mentioned framework reinforces the importance of research and extension projects that overcome this demand, providing support and care to vulnerable communities

- especially in times of overload of the public system, such as during the COVID-pandemic<sup>19,42</sup>, besides being indispensable to establish the link between university and society<sup>43</sup>.

The limitations of the study consist of: (1) difficulty in obtaining complete answers from adolescents during the interviews; (2) absence of a control group; (3) high dropout rate (43%) for various reasons such as difficulty in locomotion, lack of identification and incompatible schedules. As strengths of the study we can highlight: (1) qualitative methodology that allowed to analyze subjective aspects of the participants; (2) adequate intervention time according to Jensen *et al.*<sup>44</sup>. It is suggested that future research be performed with a larger sample and compare the results obtained with a control group.

## CONCLUSION

Regarding the categories of analysis, it was identified that the motivations of the subjects to participate

in the program, focused on the possibility of weight loss, which is a limited perception of health. However, the final interviews indicated that the interventions were effective to expand the concept of health of the participants. Regarding food, the interviews made it possible to understand that, at an early stage, adolescents associate the act of eating with feelings such as anxiety and nervousness. At the end of the program, it was possible to notice that adolescents acquired theoretical and practical knowledge about the subject, which confirms the effectiveness of nutritional education and psychotherapy strategies in changing behaviors related to food. The responses related to the category of physical exercises demonstrated a change in the modalities practiced by the participants, possibly due to the social isolation framework installed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The results reinforce the importance of understanding adolescents' perceptions about their own

health and related habits, in order to develop effective strategies focused on the prevention and treatment of obesity, through health promotion.

### Conceptualization

ICS, LFG, BHMB. Data acquisition: ICS, DCM, JJR, GSR. Data analysis: CFAC, LFG. Writing - original draft: ICS. Writing - review and editing: ICS, LFG, BHMB.

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### Conflicts of interest

The authors state that there are no conflicts of interest in the preparation of the manuscript.

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## Resumo

**Introdução:** A percepção dos indivíduos a respeito da própria saúde é um forte indicador do seu real estado, bem como dos seus comportamentos relativos ao prognóstico em caso de presença de patologias, além de ser proporcional às suas motivações para adquirir hábitos saudáveis.

**Objetivo:** Descrever as motivações de adolescentes acima do peso ao participarem de um programa multidisciplinar de promoção da saúde e suas percepções a respeito de hábitos relacionados ao bem estar físico e emocional.

**Métodos:** Trata-se de estudo de abordagem qualitativa, com emprego da técnica de análise de conteúdo de Bardin. A ferramenta utilizada para coleta de dados foi a entrevista semiestruturada, analisada com auxílio do software QSR NVivo 11 através de agrupamento das falas em clusters. Esses por sua vez foram avaliados em três categorias: (1) motivação; (2) alimentação; e (3) exercício físico.

**Resultados:** A idade média dos participantes foi de  $13,8 \pm 2,4$ , com índice de massa corporal médio de  $31,8 \text{ kg/m}^2 \pm 8,5$ . Em relação à renda familiar, 41,66% apresentaram renda mensal de 3 a 6 salários mínimos. No que tange à escolaridade dos responsáveis, 70,83% das mães possuíam o ensino superior completo, enquanto 29,16% possuíam ensino médio completo. De acordo com as respostas dos entrevistados a maior motivação para participarem de um programa multidisciplinar de tratamento da obesidade foi o emagrecimento. Já na categoria 2 observou-se que os adolescentes associaram o ato de comer com sentimentos como a ansiedade e o nervosismo. Na categoria 3, constatou-se o impacto da pandemia sob as modalidades de exercício físico praticados.

**Conclusão:** Os resultados comprovam a importância de entender a percepção dos adolescentes a respeito da própria saúde e hábitos relacionados, a fim de elaborar de estratégias efetivas para promoção da saúde e consequente, melhoria da qualidade de vida desses indivíduos.

**Palavras-chave:** Comportamento do Adolescente; Comportamentos Relacionados com a Saúde; Equipe Multiprofissional; Pesquisa Qualitativa.

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