

Pasifika Kiwis: eating to live or living to eat?

Obesity is a growing problem for New Zealanders and especially for Pacific Islanders. BELINDA MOORE takes a look at how social and cultural environments influence the foods Pacific people choose to eat.

When Tangata (Katie) Tutini came to New Zealand from Rarotonga as a 25-year-old, she was a tiny size eight.

Now, at 61, she has high blood pressure, chronic asthma and two heart attacks under her belt.

Tutini's health is deteriorating because of her weight.

She weighs 100kg – far too much for a woman only 1.6m tall or five foot three.

Her doctor wants her to get down to 75kg. Tutini would be happy with 80kg.

"I want to live and to see my grandchildren and my family but I have to go and exercise," says Tutini.

"I want to lose weight, but I don't know how."

Tutini's story is not new or unusual. New Zealand is in the grip of an obesity epidemic.

About half a million New Zealanders are obese and some 250,000 school-aged children are overweight or obese.

Pacific Islanders, alongside Maori, are the worst affected.

In 2006, 48 per cent of female and 38 per cent of male Pacific Islanders were obese.

They are also outstripping their non-Pacific counterparts in weight-related health problems like diabetes and heart disease.

But those working at the forefront of obesity research say solving the crisis for Pacific Islanders is not as simple as telling them to lose weight.

Social and cultural mores play a huge part in how effectively the healthy-eating message is getting through.

Just like Tutini, many know they have to lose weight and are now starting to understand the risks of inaction.

Yet if the message is slowly getting through, why are Pacific Islanders still getting fatter?

The general consensus from obesity researchers is that many Pacific Islanders in New Zealand live in an "obesogenic" environment.

Their whole environment is geared towards being obese.

As the Ministry of Health points out, Pacific peoples are, on average, more exposed to high risk factors such as low incomes, poor housing and bigger families, which all make it harder for them to lose weight.

However, among health experts there is now a move away from notions of individual blame and ethnic finger pointing.

New methods focus on how a person's



HEALTHY: A good choice for lunch.

environment affects their health.

These include access to nutrition information, affordable food, physical activity and interaction at church and school.

The focus has shifted away from weight loss to the promotion of healthy living and programmes working with children are based on this new model.

Tongan researcher Dr David Schaff, from the School of Population Studies at the University of Auckland, is studying hundreds of high school students as part of the *Obesity Prevention in Communities* (OPIC) study – or *Living 4 Life*, the name students gave the programme.

Dr Schaff says the children are struggling in their environment.

"They know what the messages are, but they need us to help them out with the

environment."

The study has been described as potentially groundbreaking because no Western country has yet cracked the obesity epidemic.

The five-year study, which started in 2002, looks at the lifestyles of 13 to 18-year-olds.

The results will be compared with findings from a similar study in Geelong, Australia, where the majority of participants are white.

Four high schools are taking part in the *Living 4 Life* programme – Mangere College, Aorere College, Auckland Seventh Day Adventist High and Southern Cross Campus.

Living 4 Life was born out of a collaboration of teachers, students, the OPIC team and representatives from bodies like Counties Manukau District Health Board

and Maunkau City Council.

It identifies five key things in the school environment that can be changed to prevent obesity.

Eating breakfast, drinking more water and fewer sugary drinks, exercising at lunchtime and after school, watching less television and providing healthier foods in the tuckshop.

They all contribute to a healthier lifestyle.

Dr Schaff says the programme is all about intervention; reaching children and getting on top of the problem before they become adults.

"You can't just go out there in the community and say you're all obese and you should lose weight. You've got to get the message out in a friendlier way."

Jody Warbrick, *Living 4 Life* programme manager, is doing just that.



OR NOT: A combination of grease, sugar and fat.

She works alongside students helping to create what she calls "champions in life" and says *Living 4 Life* works because it is driven by students.

"The beauty of this is I challenge these kids to put on their oxygen masks and breathe for themselves and then they take what they've learnt and they give these messages to people they love – which are usually their families."

But what about families like Tutini's? Her kids left school long ago without the benefit of nutritional advice.

They also straddle the cultural divide of having parents born "in the islands" but being New Zealand-born themselves.

Tutini's eldest daughter Katrina Tui is struggling with her own food-related issues.

At 30, she is starting to realise her

knowledge of food and how to cook has been greatly affected by how her mother brought her up.

At size 10-12, Tui is not overweight and by looking at her you would not guess there would be anything amiss with her health.

Yet her fat percentage – 38 per cent – is at a dangerous level.

She says she would like to get pregnant, but her nutritionist is concerned about the effects of carrying a baby on top of fat stored mainly around her waist.

Tui grew up eating whatever her mother gave her and recalls coming home from school to greasy lamb chops, mashed potatoes and tomato sauce for afternoon tea.

Tui is not angry at her mum because she didn't know any better at the time.

"She actually never thought she would be feeding us fat," Tui says.

She recalls breakfasts of pies and pizza, alongside traditional island fare like taro and fish.

"I can change everything, the way I live and everything, but eating's really hard because I'm used to eating shitty food."

"I think it's because I've been brought up that way and it's hard to change. I know what to eat but I don't want to eat that way," says Tui.

Victoria University Pacific-health researcher Aliitasi Tavila says cultural values surrounding special occasions play a huge role in over-riding the healthy eating message.

Tavila's research on Samoan women in a church environment showed the pressure women were under from high chiefs and church leaders to serve traditional high-fat foods at church gatherings.

Women who tried to provide healthy options received negative comments from their community because it appeared that the church could not provide adequately.

"When it comes to special occasions, [Samoan women] go for the best . . . like pork, which is considered delicate and very culturally important," says Tavila.

This is why Dr Schaff believes the environment in which Pacific Islanders live must change, or the healthy-eating message will never get through.

He uses the example of parents who give their children money to buy food at school.

"Some parents think giving their kids money is showing them you love them more. When you give kids money it's like giving them bullets with guns," he says.

And the research backs him up. Findings from the 2002 National Children's Nutrition Survey showed a major source of fat for Pacific Island children came from pies and pasties.

Almost half of Pacific children usually skipped breakfast at home and a third ate or drank unhealthy options on the way to school.

Niuean policeman Ben Tongalea, 26, clearly remembers his school lunches.

He wasn't given any money because in a family of nine, his parents couldn't afford to.

So going without breakfast was the norm and lunch was "cheese" sandwiches.

Well not really. He says he called them cheese sandwiches because his mother would slice the butter so thick that it would look like cheese.

This is the kind of story obesity researchers cringe at.

When the OPIC study finishes this year, the research will be collated and a recommendation made to the New Zealand Government.

Researchers hope the intervention programme will be adopted in schools around the country.

Meanwhile Tutini is struggling with winter.

Her asthma is worse and her demanding job as a live-in disability carer leaves little time for exercise or preparing healthy meals.

"I do worry about myself, seriously," says Tutini.

"I want to be slim again, eat healthy and exercise."

"It will happen. I have to do it."

PHOTOS: ANNA HARRISON